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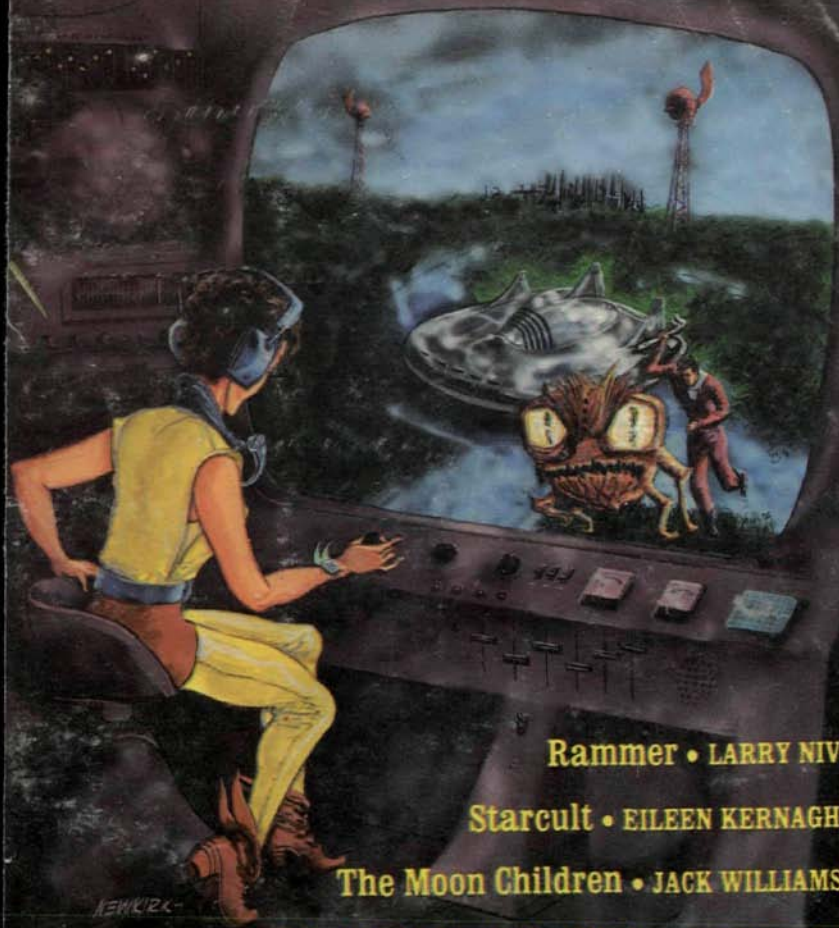
Galaxy

MAGAZINE

SCIENCE FICTION



Rammer • LARRY NIVEN

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The Moon Children • JACK WILLIAMSON

Birds Fly South In Winter • STEPHEN TALL

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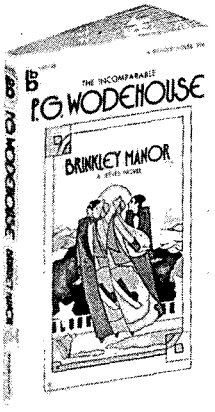
JEEVES meets CTHULHU



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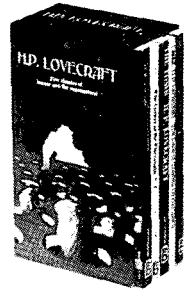

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Galaxy
SCIENCE FICTION

MAGAZINE

ALL STORIES NEW

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Kill only what you can eat. Eat only what you can love.

BIRDS FLY SOUTH IN WINTER

STEPHEN TALL

WE CAME out of Ultraspan—and into the glowing grandeur of the Seven Suns.

From Earth they didn't look like much, a paltry cluster of bright pinpoints. They don't loom large on galactic charts. But they had been a sort of serious hobby with Doug Frost for years. The monograph for which he is best known is a meticulous analysis of that inconspicuous little group.

His speculations had included the high probability of planets around each star. The nature of the Seven Suns made life on some of those orbiting worlds a distinct possibility. Or so ran Doug Frost's hypotheses. And he was our Galileo, our Harlow Shapley. His thoughts are infinitely respectable. And he was why we were here, a hundred and thirty light-years from Sol III and from the research ship *Stardust's* home cradle at Tycho Base on Earth's moon. This trip was for Doug Frost. For him the lure was to

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study his friends at close range. For us the bait was possible life on those hypothetical planets.

We've found life. The *Stardust's* count of worlds examined includes several on which life abounded. We've found advanced forms and in a couple of instances sophisticated capacities and technologies. We've made friends with strange beings. We have seen a cultured world destroyed. But we've never found living things close to humanoid—and never any that approached space capacity.

"Alert. All personnel, alert. Emergency drill. Personal space equipment. Take all precautions and stand by."

Stony Price, communications chief, rarely sounded completely serious, but he did then. Stony's message was one of a series everyone knew, but I had only heard this one used once before. It was the *Prepare To Abandon Ship* alert. He repeated it after exactly one minute. Then the intercom went on automatic, repeating "Alert—" at brief intervals.

We were in pattern after the Ultraspan stage. It had been a big one—seventeen light-years—and it was the last. We were there. We had arrived. The pattern was welcome, but I'm not sure I can explain why. All I know is the greater the stage distance, the more important the pattern seems to be.

"Saved by a meteor—or maybe a space dragon." Pegleg Williams stood up so slowly that you would have had to know him to realize that he had recognized and reacted before the message was half complete. "I'd have had you in two moves, Roscoe."

"A random statement—" I began, but Pegleg was at the door.

"Leave the board," he called.

WE HAD been playing space chess in my lab, allowing our bodies to adjust from the painless, timeless rigors of a long stage to the different feels and stresses of a new sector of space. That sounds like Jabberwocky, but it is simply stated fact. Theoretically an Ultraspan stage is accomplished without time lapse. There is no genuine physical stress. You feel nothing, experience nothing. For a timeless moment you simply cease to be. Then, by the next tick of the chronometer, your surroundings are changed, different. A new arrangement of stars will show on the viewscreens. And the feel of the space is alien.

Pegleg's nearest emergency space gear was in his own lab. I brought out mine from its special locker, checked each item against my master list, slipped into the space suit. It took perhaps thirty seconds. It was the most practiced routine aboard the *Stardust*. Dr. Johannes Rasmussen's favorite motto is *Be prepared*. Back

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in the twentieth century he would undoubtedly have been a boy scout.

My helmet under one arm, maintenance pack and propulsion unit slung over a shoulder, I headed for the control room. I beat Pegleg by the twenty seconds it had taken him to get to his lab. The others were there.

In the unlikely event that Johnny Rasmussen became unable to command the starship *Stardust* there were four of us who could fill the gap. The control room was our station in emergency.

"Dr. Kissinger. Dr. Williams."

If we hadn't known an emergency existed, we would never have learned it from Johnny's tone of voice. Tall, slender, perfectly groomed, his tanned face newly shaved, his mustaches waxed to points, he might have just invited us in for a spot of tea.

"What gives, Johnny?" I asked. Pegleg was puffing from his flying trip through the corridors. His trick leg slows him up.

"Perhaps nothing to justify a general alert," Johnny said. "On the other hand, we've survived by not taking chances. The matter sensors have detected an object."

"Must be some object," grunted Pegleg. "I had Roscoe right where I wanted him in that chess game."

"That's something that can be checked out," I said. "Unless Cap'n Jules louses up the gravity those pieces will still be on the board when we get back.

"I'll try not to jar them," Captain Jules said dryly. "I can see that they're pretty important."

I almost felt like leading a cheer for Captain Jules Griffin. The comment was the closest approach to a witticism I had ever heard from him. Stolid, pedantic, just plain dull, Jules was nonetheless the genius who understood and exercised uncanny control over the mighty timonium engines that moved the *Stardust* in finite space. And he was one of the few men alive who could implement Ultraspan. But he had no small talk, no social graces. He said what he thought in briefest form. Mostly he kept silent.

"Take a look, Roscoe."

Moe Cheng sat before his navigator's viewscreen—small, inconspicuous in his huge chair. Probably no living being has ever known as much about the galaxy as this big-nosed, slant-eyed little man.

PEGLEG and I gathered around. The "object" was clear on the screen—and the reason for the alert was plain. An alien spaceship plowed steadily along, glinting in the yellow light of the nearest of the Seven Suns. I say that positively. There was no mistaking what it was. We had known that it would happen some time, but to

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come out of Ultraspan practically in its path must have been a little disconcerting to Captain Jules and to Moe Cheng.

"You've taken your time," I observed. "That thing is close."

"Five thousand miles," Moe Cheng said. "It has been closer. We sheered off and turtled up as soon as we detected it after the stage."

"Did it react?"

"No response of any kind. Our sudden appearance may have been unbelievable to its crew. Our disappearance more so. We've been studying it for thirty minutes and it hasn't changed course or speed. Ten thousand miles an hour, following its nose."

"Primitive, I gather," Pegleg said. "You don't get the impression of cruising. I'd say it's going all out."

Cheng nodded slowly.

"Ion drive. A complex exhaust. A lot of its mass would have to be fuel. It is unlikely that it's anything more than an interplanetary craft. We guess it hasn't the capacity for interstellar space."

"That means—"

"Correct," Johnny Rasmussen said. "Planets in the neighborhood. Dr. Frost is investigating. But the spaceship is heading into the system, toward what we believe to be its sun. Hence its home world would be farther out, at a cooler, more agreeable distance from the primary. Heat radiation here is pretty intense. A planet in our present location would be tolerable to life as we know it, but hot. Much would depend on its mass, atmosphere and so on. The spaceship may be exploring, pioneering. Opinion Roscoe?"

"On short notice what you've said sounds reasonable," I agreed.

"If we're turtled up and presumably undetected—why the alert?" Pegleg inquired.

Rasmussen leaned back in his chair and his teeth showed briefly.

"Two reasons, Dr. Williams. One is that word 'presumably.' We can't be sure we're undetected. They—whatever they are—may simply be trying to figure us out, watching while not seeming to watch. Who knows what detection and analytical potential they may have?"

"Makes sense." Pegleg nodded. He piled his helmet and space accessories onto a chair and flexed his arms. "Stuff's heavy," he grumbled. "How about reason number two?"

"Mr. Cheng has another hypothesis," Rasmussen said. "He postulates that the ship, still under drive as it is, may be out of control. Its crew may be dead or may have abandoned ship for some unknown reason. In effect, we may have a derelict."

"It has made not the slightest adjustment," Moe Cheng said.

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"So?"

"So we're thinking of investigating. If we're wrong—and they have us in view—boarding could be tricky. Hence—all personnel should be alert, ready and standing by, as ordered."

I might explain what we meant by "turtling up." The *Stardust* had the capacity to scramble, to reflect and refract not only light but other radiation that would reveal it in such a fashion that we became, in effect, invisible. Behind this screen a forcefield enclosed the ship in an almost impenetrable envelope. The turtle was inside his shell. In terms of applied energies as we could envision them the *Stardust* was both undetectable and impervious to attack. But with an alien technology, who could be sure? As I've said many times before, Johnny Rasmussen left nothing to chance. That is why, when in the far future galactic history has piled up, the *Stardust* will still be legend.

WE STUDIED the craft for a few minutes on Moe Cheng's screen. As Pegleg had said, it was probably primitive. It looked like a flying spearhead, its bow a glinting point, its stern deeply divided with a cleft that gave it two long trailing sections to the rear. A row of round viewports extended the length of the ship. I counted twenty-one on the side in view. And up near the point of the bow a flattened blister, like a pilot's cabin, broke the metallic surface. An empty pilot's cabin. At least, nothing showed in it.

"I would almost guess," Pegleg mused, "that that thing is a modification of an atmospheric design. It may even be navigable in the atmosphere of its planet of origin."

Cheng nodded approvingly.

"Dr. Rasmussen has suggested the same thing. It gives weight to my idea that it would not be too risky to approach and investigate. The beings who built that ship are relatively new to space."

"Scoutboat?" I asked.

"Right. Interested?"

I grinned and turned to the chief.

"Proposal, Johnny. I take a scoutboat, young Pete Watts as pilot, you to supply a language expert and Captain Jules to delegate us an engineer. We circle, probe and, if we get no response, approach the spaceship. If still no reaction, we put a man out to explore the skin, look in the viewports and try to see how the entry ports are designed. How does that grab you?"

"And who will that man be, I wonder?" Pegleg jeered. "You're trying to rig it so I'll never prove that I've got you dead to rights on that chess board."

"Strike the language expert," I said. "Pegleg wants to go. No doubt there's something out there

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that's right down a geologist's alley."

"Fortunately," Pegleg said smugly, "I have competence in many fields."

"Including conversation," I agreed.

If all this sounds like little boys wrangling over a game of marbles, think nothing of it. It's simply the way we function. Behind that smokescreen good minds are operating. We know what we're doing. The ever-growing series of volumes of *The Log Of The Stardust* is a big segment in the broad base of the history of space exploration.

There are a lot of good names in those weighty tomes and every one represents a master scientist, a top specialist in his (or her) field—and because of our galactic experience we are all unique. There are none like us anywhere. There will be—but not yet. There's one name among ours whose owner stands out as different even aboard so unique an entity as the *Stardust's* one-of-a-kind human components make her. Ursula Potts is a painter, mystic and, some have insisted, a genuine card-carrying witch. But her painted analyses have status with the most profound reports the rest of us have written. She sometimes sees things no one else sees. That she's weird has nothing to do with it.

And now as we looked at the spacecraft on Moe Cheng's screen, I felt sure that Ursula's magic brushes were already putting it on canvas—and with a difference that makes Ursula forever an original.

I turned to Rasmussen.

"Ursula?" I asked. "Does she know, Johnny?"

"She had it almost before we did," the chief admitted. "One of these years I'm going to learn how she does it."

"Don't depend on it." I punched a button on the intercom console.

"Well?" A thin, sharp, old, impatient voice.

"Roscoe, Ursula. What do you think?"

"Artifact, Roscoe. No life."

"You think it was launched without a crew? With a pilot's blister and all those ports?"

"Didn't say that. No life now. Doesn't feel alive."

"With that assurance I think I'll go out and have a look. If you say so, it's probably safe. I can depend on you, Ursula."

"Soft soap."

Ursula's light went out, but I knew she was pleased. Every man in the control room, even Captain Jules, was grinning.

"While I'm at it," Rasmussen said, "I'd like to know how you do that."

"The same characteristic that makes Ursula function. I'm sheer genius. Do we go?"

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"You go," the chief said. "Set it up."

II

THE scoutboat eased gently from her pressure-sealed slip and the port closed behind her. At my direction the pilot swung in a ten-mile ellipse around the *Stardust* while we oriented. If the eye could be believed we were completely isolated and alone in the emptiness of space in a cigar-like forty-foot gondola, a slim, metallic and featureless sliver glinting in the intense rays of the yellow sun. The *Stardust* had vanished. We knew it was there and I marveled once again at the efficiency of the light camouflage.

Visible only at high magnification, but clear and definite on our space radar, the alien ship cruised on at her unvarying pace. Her direction had not altered a fraction. She seemed, as Ursula had said, lifeless.

"Veer off and circle at a thousand miles, Pete. We'll spiral in on her and watch her every second. I don't think she's playing possum—but that's how people find out what the next life is like. I'm pretty fond of this one, so stay on it, Gino." The last was to the young engineer assigned us by Captain Jules. Actually he had won the draw. Every engineer had been fighting to come.

"Roger, Dr. Kissinger. I like this incarnation pretty well myself." The boy's teeth gleamed in a swarthy face.

We rarely work with scoutboats in deep space. They're not designed for it and the need to use them comes almost never. They're handy little explorer craft, four-man capacity and adaptable to the use of any of our many specialists. They make us mobile in atmosphere when a planet is being analyzed.

But this was a different, a tricky situation, one we had never faced before, and we didn't dare risk the mother ship. The scoutboat was spaceworthy. It could do the job.

We flashed toward the alien, hit the thousand-mile point and veered. No reaction of any sort. Pete worked us in in a series of sweeps at thirty thousand miles an hour. From her point of vantage the *Stardust* must have seen us as a minnow streaking through a current. As we closed in we zigzagged, swung high above the spearhead and steadied, matching its pace. I could see into the pilot's blister with binoculars. It was empty.

"Okay, boys, here goes nothing. Take her alongside, Pete."

During the entire approach Pegleg hadn't said a word. Now he tightened his helmet into place, activated his microphone.

"Technically you're running this

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show, Roscoe, so I can only suggest. If they don't blast us—and I don't think they will—let me make the space walk. You have a wife."

"Lindy will be touched." I was dogging my own helmet. "You boys be sure to tell her of Dr. Williams' concern, if it comes to that. I think the space walk is a two-man job. Why don't we both go, Pegleg?"

I imagine Pegleg's surprise was minimal. He knew as well as I did what the MO would be. We've worked together so much we can read each other's minds. As a galactic ecologist I often manage to land in some pretty hairy situations. And there have been times when it was a mighty comfortable feeling to know that I was being backed up by one of the orneriest, most cantankerous, most completely dependable characters in space.

THE scoutboat lay practically alongside the alien, which was loafing along a hundred feet away. Nothing stirred. By now I was convinced that nothing would. We studied it curiously.

It was interesting, but not overwhelming. Perhaps two hundred feet long, it had more depth than had appeared at distance. Its row of ports peered at us like blind eyes and sunlight glinted along its otherwise unbroken metallic sides. Or at least they seemed unbroken.

"Keep us in view, boys," I instructed. "If our communication quits, pick us up. Notify the *Stardust* we're going out."

I went through the first lock into the tiny decompression cubicle, checked out my equipment, signaled Gino and launched myself into the glittering cold of space.

I had done this before. But always in orbit, always with the bulk of a planet looming, even though thousands of miles away. Here we had nothing but the silvery sliver of the scoutboat and, as I tumbled and rolled and adjusted, the glinting blind-eyed bulk of the alien spaceship.

I activated my propulsion unit, jetted gingerly away from the scoutboat. In a few minutes it seemed to give birth to the helmeted, white-clad monstrosity that was Pegleg. He adjusted, activated his jet and we eased across to the spaceship.

Having been launched into space at the speed of the ship, to change our relative positions required only gentle jetting. I tossed out a magnetic grapple and was pleased to feel how strongly it clung to the pitted skin of the alien. Pegleg anchored himself a few yards toward the stern. We began to creep over the hull, using two grapples, pulling ourselves from place to place, examining the surface as we went. Nothing indicated that we were detected.

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The soft vibration of the ship's drive neither faltered nor changed.

I thumbed my microphone switch.

"Kissinger to scoutboat. We're grappled on. The drive is crude, but it hasn't varied. We can feel the vibration. Can you see anything, Gino?"

"We have you in view. Cameras are recording. Nothing new, Dr. Kissinger."

"Leave communication open," I directed. "I'll be looking into the viewports. Dr. Williams will be trying to locate evidence of entryports."

"I think I've found one, Roscoe," Pegleg broke in. "Rectangular, about seven or eight feet high, four or five wide. Much good it'll do us. It's just a fine crease in the surface metal, probably overlapped and gasketed in a complicated fashion. How can we possibly activate it?"

"Maybe they'll let us in. Let me try the viewports. We'll burn in if nobody's home."

The viewports were virtually opaque from outside, but I could detect a dim glow. No movement. I released my grapples, jetted over the curve of the ship and regrappled beside the clear mound of the pilot blister. And that, almost certainly, was what it was. It was simple and different, but someone—or something—often sat there and operated that ship by direct view. I could plainly see the wide, apparently padded bench that was the seat of the pilot, facing an unbelievable instrument panel. No dials, no needles, no lights. Just rows and rows of what looked like toggle switches—hundreds of them. I looked especially for markings, for symbols, for any evidence of writing. Nothing.

It occurred to me that this might be the place to burn in, but on second thought I rejected the idea. There would be no airlock here. If I broke the blister I might well bleed the ship. I realized that I was thinking in Earth terms, but the vessel had to be pressurized and it had to have an atmosphere of some sort. I jetted back to Pegleg, who was still exploring.

"Two entryports, Roscoe." Pegleg's voice was clear in my earplug. "Just outlines—but that's what they are."

"We'll assume a decompression chamber and a lock behind each," I decided. "They may not be there, though. This is a relatively crude craft. I'll grapple on and see if I can burn through. Stand off and cover me."

As I guessed, the thin laser beam from my hand gun sheared along the port outline as though it were cutting cheese. I had set it for very short range. I was betting we could operate the controls of the inner lock—if there were one—and I didn't want to damage the chamber.

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I HAD cut along half the length of one side when suddenly the port door collapsed inward. Or perhaps swung would be better. It was actually hinged, thus pointing up the basic simplicity of the entire setup. The laser beam must have cut through the locking mechanism. My magnaflash showed a small metal-lined room, a heavy door on its inner side. We were lucking out. It was a chamber all right.

I signaled Pegleg, then used the microphone.

"No point in waiting," I said. "Let's go in. We can swing the door shut and it may serve while we activate the lock. There's a control panel."

"Roger." Pegleg jetted across and followed me through the port. My magnaflash illuminated the bare little space with a light brighter than day. The door closed again readily, since no pressure hindered it. Pegleg leaned against it while I tried to figure the inner lock.

There was little to figure. The door evidently was hinged, it obviously swung inward, but there was not a projection or a fixture on it. And the thing I had generously called a control panel was actually a small plate with six small toggles beside the door. No symbols, no markings, no writing of any kind. So I decided on a sequence and flipped the upper left one. I assumed a left-right, up-

Ballantine Books

DOUBLING up again. Parlous days for science fiction but then when have they not been. We seem always to be in the middle of glut or famine. BB seems to be the only publisher who is not busy cutting back, in s-f, or in any other way. But, we hate to say it, prices continue to climb. We're up there among the $1.25 lot for our Adult Fantasies, just to stay in business. Most of them are pretty long of course, and you can't come home at 320 pages for 75¢ (dream-world stuff) or even 95¢ these days. So pick your books with care.

•

SEPTEMBER sees one of our favorite books—DIET FOR A SMALL PLANET—not s-f of course, but a book with an honest-to-God new statement about eating and protein sources that hits right at the obscene waste of feeding 23 lbs. of high-grade protein to a steer in order to make one pound of edible protein for a human. Gets you off the top of the food chain, too. So buy that one first.

•

THEN we have THE CREAM OF THE JEST, by our old friend Cabell; Lin Carter's new anthology, NEW WORLDS FOR OLD; and Hal Cle-

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ment's sequel to his MISSION OF GRAVITY—STAR LIGHT. Also in September, an interesting group in our Walden series—you ought to keep your eye on that trademark—THE RADICAL THERAPIST, CATALOGUE OF THE WAYS PEOPLE GROW, THE CHILD'S CONCEPTION OF TIME and THE FUTURE OF THE FUTURE.

•

OCTOBER—Dave Gerrold's anthology, PROTOSTARS—all original stories by new young writers. Lin Carter has edited SPAWN OF CTHULHU—stories by writers other than Lovecraft (it's sort of comforting to know there are a lot of them). And we have Thomas Burnett Swann's GOAT WITHOUT HORNS (which you first read in serial form in this magazine) along with several nature books (well all right, ecology) and I WILL FIGHT NO MORE FOREVER among the Waldens. Now if you bought all the titles listed above it would cost you $14.95. Which, come to think of it, is cheap at the price. Since this column is appearing in what will be the December-dated issue, and just to make sure, a Merry Yule to you all. Keep an eye out for BB's boxed sets of Tolkien, etc., posters (some itchy Lovecraft ones) and other impedimenta by way of Christmas presents. And remember books . . . BB

down orientation since I had no basis for guessing any other pattern. And it worked.

We could feel the pressure build. There was only a hairline crack where I had cut down the side of the outer door and while the room was losing air, it wasn't losing much. The door actually seemed to reseal itself. In a short time the toggle flipped back. Apparently the pressure level had reached that of the ship.

Again I had no basis for a choice, so I flipped the next toggle. For a moment nothing happened. Then the lock door swung slowly aside and we looked into a large dim space cluttered with bales and bundles of unidentifiable cargo. Cluttered is the word I want. The stuff was piled almost at random, though the larger bales, some as tall as I was, seemed to be stacked against the walls in some order. The magnaflash made the stuff visible, but otherwise didn't help much. There were no markings on anything.

There was, though, a six-toggle plate beside the pressure chamber door identical to the one on the other side. I flipped the second switch and the door swung smoothly into place again.

I thumbed my microphone.

"So far so good. If this is a mousetrap it has just caught a couple of mice." I gave the mike full power. "Kissinger to scoutboat. Can you hear me, Gino?"

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The response was prompt and just a little fuzzy. "We've had you right along, Dr. Kissinger. Hull doesn't seem to be shielded."

"Good. We've passed through the lock. No sign of life. Stay on us and notify the *Stardust*. We're going exploring."

"Roger," the technician said cheerfully. "Luck."

The temptation was great to examine everything minutely, but that could come later. That life I mentioned—first priority was to check it out. I didn't expect to find any. No crew, no survivors of any tragedy would have been so quiet, so inconspicuous. Although in our bulky white suits and gleaming helmets we might have looked pretty formidable to less complex life forms, even if they had progressed to space travel. Perhaps they were simply waiting to close the mousetrap for sure.

I didn't feel entirely cheerful as I activated another switch at the other end of the cargo space. A door silently admitted us to a long corridor, dimly lit by dully glowing ceiling spots and entirely empty. We marked our location and went cautiously forward, each with a laser gun at ready. Control was probably toward the front of the ship and there, if anywhere, we thought to find evidence of the apparently vanished crew.

But nothing stirred. The metal floor vibrated gently with the steady pulse of the drive. The ship seemed organized around that central corridor and switch plates showed beside doors at irregular intervals along it. We activated a couple. The doors swung back to show space packed with packaged cargo. Everything seemed crude, simple, even unfinished.

THE third door we opened, far forward, produced the jackpot. The room was large and almost empty. We added the perfect light of magnaflashes to the dim glow of the ceiling spots and instantly swung our laser guns forward. A huge hairy beast lay sprawled on a great thick bedding pad almost in the center of the room. I forgot to breathe for a minute as we stood there, frozen. But the thing lay still and gradually we relaxed.

"It's dead, Pegleg." I probably sounded more hopeful than sure.

"I wish no ill to any creature," Pegleg said dryly, "but I think I'm just a little bit glad. What a varmint to take on a space voyage."

I continued to study the dark, thick-armed, thick-legged mound on the bedding pad.

"We have pets on the *Stardust*," I observed.

"Not grizzly-bear size we don't."

"It has its own specially designed bed," I said. "The room

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walls look like the others. It doesn't seem to have been caged."

We advanced a few cautious steps and stood looking down at the creature. Its great head, long-snouted, was flung back and the open jaws showed even rows of yellow tusks: the flesh-tearing teeth of a carnivore. The heavy legs ended in broad plantigrade feet and the four toes bore curved blunt claws. The hairy forepaws had amazingly long fingerlike digits. With, I noted particularly, an opposable thumb. One of those paws would have spanned a space three times the size of my hand. And I've got a hand like a Virginia ham.

Pegleg's reference to a grizzly was pretty apt. But make it a big grizzly. The body organization was remarkably Earthlike and that was a thing we had not found before in many contacts with galactic life. There was no reason for living things a hundred and thirty light-years distant to resemble Earth life. But there was no reason for them not to either.

I bent and lifted one of the outflung forelimbs. It moved easily. No rigor mortis.

"Not dead long," I said. "Seems in good shape. Remind me to decontaminate twice when I'm back aboard the scoutboat. This thing died of something that worked pretty fast."

"Let's find what would keep pets like this."

But there was nothing else aboard the craft that could ever have been alive.

We found a control room of sorts with a blank, striplike viewscreen and the disconcerting toggle switches in banks on every wall. One door opened directly into the pilot blister above, an access reached by a broad ramp. There were no chairs, but thick pads lay on the floor before the toggle banks and the broad bench in the pilot blister was padded in the same fashion. I quit thinking like an Earthman and began to assemble my data as a galactic spaceman should. And the answer was obvious.

"What do you think, Pegleg?"

I could see his quizzical look through the shielded plastic of his helmet.

"I think we've found everything," he said slowly, as though he were ashamed of having been so dense. "We've been looking for something that doesn't exist and never has."

We generally come up with the answer at about the same time.

"Right. Let's look in on him again, then get out of here. The *Stardust* will have his origin pinpointed by now. Captain Jules can put a crew of mechanics and technicians aboard to figure out all those blasted toggles."

The situation still seemed unbelievable as we stood looking down again on the huge hairy form. But at the same time it made sense.

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"Captain, crew, navigator," I said. "Maybe designer and builder as well. Not as far along the technological trail as we, but potentially probably just as sharp."

"Granted," Pegleg admitted. "But you may still have the privilege of notifying next of kin. If he were alive I don't think I'd trust him?"

"What else is new?" I retorted. "You don't trust anybody. Why except him?"

"Give a dog a bad name—" Pegleg mumbled. "Let's get back to the scoutboat."

WE MAY never find another species that has achieved space travel. Probably some exist but, I'm beginning to suspect, not in the abundance that the theorizers, the probability experts and the storytellers would have you believe. Sure, it's a big galaxy. But the evidence is piling up that this crude flying ship was more of a red-letter deal than first appeared. So I've given it room in this account. It may turn out to be unique.

In an hour we were back aboard the *Stardust*, reporting in person to Johnny Rasmussen.

"A sort of galactic prairie schooner," I summed it up, "but operated by a grizzly instead of a settler. Did you get a line on where he might have been going?"

The chief nodded.

"Dr. Frost has checked out the system. It is remarkably Sol-like, as I suspect most systems that have developed life will be. Remember Primrose, Cyrene, Mizar. This sun has four planets and three have atmospheres. It may well be the most life-rich system we have ever contacted."

We were out of turtle. Rasmussen had already given the order that would put four technicians on board the "prairie schooner." Its destination planet, while probably steamy and hot, was judged habitable, but its planet of origin had far more attraction for us. Since we had come out of Ultraspan roughly halfway between them, there was not much doubt about where we would go first.

"When the men solve the controls of the ship it will be turned about, programed for home and allowed to return under its own power. Mr. Cheng has determined that it has been in space for about a month. This will give us ample time to survey the planet and to prepare the senders for its return."

"You haven't seen those boys," Pegleg remarked. "They may be hard to reason with. Suppose they think we done it?"

"Beings that can build a spaceship are reasonable," the chief decided. "In any case, we can handle the situation."

"We always could" I agreed. "Pegleg, the chess board waits."

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III

AN HOUR later, all square in games, we gave it up and I went back to my quarters. It's always special when Lindy's there to greet me, but of course that doesn't always happen. Lindy's lab is one of the more complicated and delicate operations aboard the *Stardust*. She always has something going. Dr. Linda Peterson had been the explorer ship's microbiologist from the beginning. Changing her name to Kissinger hadn't changed her dedication.

But this time she was there. It has been eight years now since that wedding in the clear sky over Cyrene Four and the wonder of it is still with me whenever I come "home" and she is waiting.

She's everything I'm not.

She was a luscious armful when I came through the door and no woman could have pretended the kiss she gave me. Then she seized my chin between flashing white teeth and bit—sharply. I held her tightly.

"If that broke the skin I'm going to have a hard time explaining it," I said.

"That's to remind you," she murmured, "that you're to tell me when you go out! I don't want to hear about it from Johnny or from a casual word on the intercom. You were climbing over the hulk out there like a space-suited louse before I even knew you actually had gone."

"Nice comparison," I said. "A psychiatrist could probably make something of it." I held her at arm's length and studied her glowing face, dancing green eyes and bright hair curling and cascading over perfect shoulders. "I'll always make it back, you know. I've got something to come back to."

She hugged me again convulsively.

"You're a thick-armed, muscle-bound, hairy brute, Roscoe, but you're my hairy brute. Bear with me, friend. I have to act like a woman once in a while."

I stroked the glistening red hair. The ringlets clung to my fingers.

"If you were any more like a woman I probably couldn't stand it," I said. "But wait till I complain."

"If you think that this was no way for a couple of the finer heads in the galaxy to behave I think I feel a little sorry for you. You've missed a lot of the wonder of living and your marriage is probably a complete flop. Which, as far as this account is concerned, is neither here nor there. We like the way we live together. And maybe it keeps the strangeness of our strangest of all occupations from having effect on us eventually. Together we can take things as they come.

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CAPTAIN JULES' technicians were stymied for a bit by the controls of the derelict, but eventually they worked them out. Lindy and I were watching on the viewscreen in our quarters when the ship began to veer, to zigzag, to vary its speed as the men experimented. Then she swept in a slow, wide curve and finally steadied, her snout pointed back along the trail in space she had lately traveled. She would go home alone.

The decision had been a touchy one to make. Her captain and navigator should perhaps have gone back with her. Had his form been human he probably would have gone. But he was only a savage-looking, hairy beast—and Jim Peters, our chief zoologist, could not bear to throw away the only really Earthlike specimen we had found outside the solar system. It would have broken his heart. So the grizzly captain, carefully preserved, was in the *Stardust's* specimen lockers when we left his ship to lumber home and flashed toward his planet of origin.

The pattern after Ultraspan had been the busiest I could remember. I usually sleep before a stage and was not tired, but to have to adjust simultaneously to a new space and an emergency situation was wearing. Still, when the distant planet began to grow on the screens the old anticipation came back. We've landed on new worlds twenty-seven times, now and for not one of us will anything ever be like it.

We had no way of predicting what we were getting into, though we had a sample of the planet's life and technology while still millions of miles away. Concentrations of population—cities in which the citizens were great yellow-fanged and hairy beasts—were pretty hard to envision, but we knew that the chances were there. Undoubtedly aircraft would be cutting the atmosphere of the strangely golden sphere steadily expanding on the screens. It was a beautiful world. All life planets we've found have been lovely.

The entrance bell to our quarters chimed mellowly and the red light glowed. I released the lock. Pegleg strolled in, the faintest hint of a limp showing as he swung his plastic knee. The leg had been bitten off by a plesiosaur-like critter during one of our first explorations years before. A lesser man would have been handicapped. Pegleg, if you'll bear with the pun, took it in stride.

"Greetings, both," he said cheerily. "Just dropped in for a few social moments and maybe a cup of coffee. That is," he amended, "if you have no bourbon."

"We're normally teetotalers, as you know," Lindy said gravely, "but we might have a wee nip for a guest. Sit ye down, Pegleg.

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And in an hour or so we may find out why you really came by."

PEGLEG grinned and sat as directed. Lindy set out bottles, glasses and ice. Then, drinks at elbow, we all sat and watched the approaching planet grow on the viewscreen.

"It bugs me, Roscoe," Pegleg said abruptly. "Why did that fellow die? The autopsy boys found nothing they would judge abnormal. No injury. No illness."

I swirled the bourbon in my glass.

"I've thought about it," I admitted. "He seemed pretty hearty just to go without strife or struggle. But that's what he did. No doubt of it."

"If we knew," Pegleg said thoughtfully, "it might help with the job coming up. We'll have to report him DOA to his peers and contemporaries, won't we?"

"You won't," I pointed out. "That's Johnny's job. He's The Man. Your job is rocks."

Pegleg raised an eyebrow.

"I meddle," he said. "I butt in. Furthermore, if they're unhappy with us, I might not have the freedom of their foothills and mountains, valleys and plains. If they don't like us— I keep remembering those teeth."

"I doubt they use them on visitors," I said. "As Johnny pointed out, beings who can build a spaceship are reasonable. They were predators once, flesh-tearing carnivores no doubt, when they were on their way up. Now they'll probably just arrest you and toss you in the klink for trespassing."

Pegleg held out his glass wordlessly and Lindy poured from the right bottle. Pegleg preferred to use water to bathe in or to brush his teeth.

"He was, if you'll excuse the expression, nude. With all that hair I admit it didn't make much difference. But he wore no ornaments, carried no weapon. Further, we haven't found any of either since. Comments? Hypotheses? How would you tell a policeman if you saw one?"

"We're taking a lot for granted," I admitted. "He may, after all, just have been a big pet left behind when the crew abandoned ship."

Pegleg shook his head emphatically.

"No evidence. No sign of any other life. Uh-uh. He ran the ship."

"His body and mouth micropopulations are interesting," Lindy contributed. "My girls are working on them. The parasitologists have found some real, genuine worm types in his innards, too. But nothing at all that could have killed him."

The *Stardust* was under full timonium drive. Within the dimensions of any planetary system we don't have to dawdle

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around. We can get where we're going in commuter's time. We figured that the native ship would require at least a month to return to base, but already the planet was looming large on our viewscreen. We could tell that it was going to be a gaudy sight from orbit.

"Looks better every minute," I said. "Cloud flow patterns, water, poles conspicuously different. This is a world with potential, fellow travelers."

"The kind of potential is what is going to make all the difference," Pegleg said. "I'll never learn to be palsy with anything that looks like that local astronaut. No way."

"Cheer up," Lindy consoled him. "The atmosphere is probably ammonia and methane and all the exploring any of us will do will be a little strolling about in suits."

Pegleg sipped, adjusted the sour look on his narrow face and said, "Hah. The air in that ship was a neat twenty percent oxygen mix, nitrogen buffered and with regular, Earth-type humidity. It could have come out of the *Stardust*."

Lindy winked at me.

"I tried," she said.

"Bless you," Pegleg said. "I know you mean well. And it does look inviting in spite of the natives, doesn't it?"

It did.

THE curve of the planet had inched across the screen until we looked out on a pattern of continents and oceans, cloud patches hundreds of miles wide and great open areas that glittered in the rays of the yellow sun. We could feel the checked speed as Captain Jules swung us into a long elliptical orbit higher than we usually implement for our initial look-see from space. Johnny Rasmussen had not forgotten those possible aircraft. He wanted to be far enough out to detect them or even see them coming.

The intercom rattled, buzzed and cleared its throat. Stony Price sounded his usual cheery self.

"*Stardust* now in orbit. Distance above surface will range from five thousand to eight thousand miles. Time of each orbit, thirty-four minutes. Time before descent, four hours. Dr. Rasmussen suggests that tentative programs be set up. As for me, when I get down I'm going fishing."

Pegleg leaned forward in his chair as he studied the slowly shifting, varied, colorful surface.

"I get ideas from the darndest sources," he said. "How long has it been since our last canoe trip along good old Snake River, Roscoe?"

"Too long," I admitted. Pegleg loves to fish, but naturally there was no guarantee that what was in the waters of this world

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would faintly resemble Earth-type bass or even catfish.

"Then that's our tentative program," Pegleg said with satisfaction. "Lindy?"

"Just waiting to be asked," my wife said.

That was a lot funnier than it sounded. My wife is a woman who knows her mind. In a situation where she has rights she does not wait for an invitation. She steps right in.

Pegleg grinned as he offered: "I'll bait your hook. I know how you feel about worms."

Lindy dutifully said "Ugh," and we settled down to serious planning.

In the next four hours, while the *Stardust* looped the planet seven times, a huge mass of data piled up. Sensors probed, a variety of devices listened and the big zoom lenses of our analytical cameras pulled in sample after sample of surface detail. Before we go down we like to know what we're up against. This time, with evidences of a superior technology and space capabilities, the survey was particularly extensive. And there were some surprises.

It was a golden world. This was literally so. Vegetation was varied, with extensive forest lands, wide prairies covered with grasslike growth, swamps and marshes and great river systems, rolling dunes and barriers behind the beaches of two vast oceans. Ranges of mountains lifted high. Each orbit took us over the snow-capped poles and long reaches of tundra stretched toward what seemed to be fields of perpetual ice. Earthlike, spectacular, but with the green of the vegetation of the mother planet replaced by gold. The yellows ranged widely in intensity. Reds and greens were not missing but the impression was of a golden sunshine planet.

One problem—we saw no evidence of that technologically advanced civilization we had been expecting. If there were cities, any kinds of concentrations of beings living together, we missed them. And anything of that magnitude we couldn't possibly have failed to detect. There were long streaks that could have been roads, but they certainly were not an improved variety. From these, secondary branches led off into country unpatterned by any appearance of development or agriculture. If there were buildings they broke the symmetry of the terrain not at all. Certainly nothing showed that even hinted at a civilization with advanced competencies.

"No city complexes. No urban sprawl. No industrial pollution. No smog—" Pegleg's recitation was tinged with more than a trace of satisfaction.

"In fact," Moe Cheng said, "no people."

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We were back in control by then, the five of us, structuring the drop-in as we usually do.

"And no aircraft, no spacecraft, no any kind of craft." I turned to Johnny Rasmussen. "We didn't goof, Johnny? The spacecraft came from here?"

The chief nodded. He steepled his long fingers and leaned back in his chair. A round-bellied brandy globe sat at his elbow and he glanced at it consideringly but did not touch it. To Dr. Johannes Rasmussen a fine brandy was more a symbol than a drink. He seemed to like to know it was there.

"No doubt at all, Dr. Kissinger. We have a hundred verifications, including matching radiation imprints." He glanced at his screen. "An underground civilization? Don't bears live in caves?"

I grinned. "Brainstorm away," I said. "Our worthy astronaut may have looked like a bear but he wasn't one. The anatomy boys find his brain fascinating and his nervous system bewildering. The cells are so different that they're puzzled. His appearance is coincidence enough."

"Perhaps," Moe Cheng suggested, "they have outgrown aggregate organization—have matured beyond it. Perhaps what we see is all there is."

"There were no weapons, no devices for defense aboard the spaceship. Even if there were ships in the sky I doubt we'd be in any kind of danger." Rasmussen finally closed his long fingers around his brandy glass.

"Too simple," Pegleg said gloomily. "That fellow *was* a weapon. And where are the ships? Camouflaged, naturally—along with the industries that would have to exist to construct them. When we get in closer there will be ships."

"Camouflaged against what?" I bounced the idea back. "At five thousand miles we are bound to miss a few things. I agree we'll see ships, but they won't be hidden. And what do you care—as long as they don't scare the fish?"

IV

WE CHOSE our drop-in spot with due regard for everyone's needs. Since there was nothing special to focus on we picked a location where we would just naturally feel at home. The season in the northern hemisphere was late summer. The *Stardust* swept down into an atmosphere as sweet as that of old Earth before pollution came, burrowed briefly through sheets of white clouds and then drifted smoothly a few hundred feet above a golden plain.

"Where foothills and forest and water and prairie all meet, please," I requested.

"Would you also like a road and perhaps some buildings?"

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Moe Cheng asked gently. "We'll see what we can do."

"A fishing stream," Pegleg put in, "with nice rock outcrops in the neighborhood for study when they're not biting."

"Flowers." Lindy stood in the control room doorway. "I want something different for my vases."

And Captain Jules delivered—on almost all counts. He brought the *Stardust* in like a leaf sliding down a summer breeze, her thousands of tons of mass turned into nothing by her newly redesigned timonium anti-gravs. She settled at full length onto a sunny open slope and a field of golden flowers stretched away and down to a little stream glinting and winking in the distance. Hills rose beyond, bright with red and yellow forest growth.

In a way it was a first.

We had found life many times, ecosystems based in an oxygen atmosphere maintained by photosynthesis, but heretofore the actual forms had always been different. The vegetation before us now was Earthlike. Add the fact that our astronaut had been a mammal-like —even bear-like—tetrapod, and the laws of probability became a bit stretched. You can see why we hung over the viewscreens and why I itched to be out and about. Pegleg's nonesense about fishing had, of course, been just that—but in the landscape before us it looked completely reasonable. The flowers seemed quite suitable for Lindy's vases. I could almost see Ursula Potts, with easel and load of painting paraphernalia, sitting on that golden slope under her red umbrella, painting and analyzing this pleasant world.

But we waited, as always, while sensors probed, analyses were made, and while every device the *Stardust* possessed checked and rechecked the atmosphere, the radiation, the possible hazards of the microlife to human explorers out there in the yellow sunshine. And the final results were gratifying.

Stony Price summarized on intercom: "Dr. Rasmussen's communique—official. A compatible world. Free reconnaissance is authorized for seventy-two hours, at the end of which time all major research heads and team chiefs will meet to formulate the coverage pattern. There must, as usual, be twenty percent of total personnel aboard the *Stardust* at all times. As for me—as I said, I'm going fishing."

"Me too," Pegleg said. "I bet there'll be crickets under logs. Best bait there is."

WHEN it came to security around the *Stardust*, Captain Jules was a purist. Two guards, laser guns in hand, stood at each of the four activated personnel ports. Since nothing in sight was

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moving, the precaution seemed a little much. In all the landings we have made the ship has never yet been attacked—it usually takes a lot of coaxing to get anything even to approach it. But guards stood by as field parties drifted out and spread casually over the nearby terrain.

Nobody seemed in a hurry. There was a pervasive quiet about the scene, a sleepy tranquility that was pleasant and infectious. We seemed to have no ambition at all. Then, too, it was late afternoon and none of us had slept since the stage.

So I didn't go afield after all. I extruded a jumper platform high on the side of the *Stardust* and Lindy and I sat there, forty feet above the meadow, and breathed deep of the winy air while we swept our surroundings with binoculars and the yellow sun sank slowly behind the western hills.

"Beautiful." Lindy sighed. "There's no strife on this world, Roscoe. I'd feel it."

"I trust your feelings within limits," I said. "But there is strife in any ecosystem. Has to be. Out there under our eyes things are killing other things, rending and tearing and devouring. Every organic crumb is being contended for. Death is happening that life may go on."

My wife gave me a disgusted look.

"You can really louse up a mood, can't you?" She tried to frown, but hers is not a face on which a frown feels at home. "You know what I mean. Quit being an ecologist for a few minutes, Roscoe. Be glad of a planet where there are no wars, no contending populations, no technologies trying to crowd each other out of existence." She breathed deeply. "Smell that air. There's no taint in it. No pollution. I'm going to love it here."

"How can you tell?" I protested. "A spacecraft came from here. It was manned by a big predator—with teeth. There you have potential for both pollution and strife."

Lindy shook her head.

"Somehow I don't believe those exist here. Oh, I grant your carnivore and your ecological interaction. Of course I know that is going on. But nothing consciously structured is evil here. This is a natural world."

"You become more like Ursula every day." I grinned. "Just don't start looking like her."

My eye picked up movement far across the prairie and I swung the binoculars into position. Living things were moving, big things. I pulled them into focus and zoomed them closer. The result was a little astonishing. Back on Earth they would have been, without any doubt, cattle. A fair-sized herd was bobbing along, running easily. I could plainly see heavy,

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horned heads, shaggy forequarters, high humps at the shoulders. Cattle? I revised my impression. They looked more like bison, the buffalo of the old American West. There were differences, like the splotched, varied pinto coloring, black and brown and red and white. No two animals seemed coated exactly alike.

Lindy had her glasses up. The herd galloped behind a finger of woodland and most of it was lost to sight. I lowered my binoculars, but focused them again when I heard Lindy gasp. The herd reappeared, this time in headlong flight.

"There was something," Lindy said. "It's behind the trees now—but it got one of them."

I swept the area, but could see nothing.

"Any impressions?"

Lindy lowered her glass and looked at me gravely.

"A very definite impression. Big, black, heavily furred. Ran on all fours, but rose on hind legs to strike. Brought down its prey with one swipe and dragged it behind those trees."

"In short—"

Lindy nodded. "It looked like the astronaut. Very much like the astronaut."

I felt a little chagrined. So we had been off the beam. The thing had been a pet, after all. The builders of the spaceship were still unknown and we would do well to get up some pretty careful reconnaissance. Johnny Rasmussen would be interested.

He was, of course. He was puzzled, too. As I was. We had grown used to thinking of the big bear-like creature as the "thinking man" of the world. Now we had to start all over. And we had, as we realized, no starting point, no clues.

Pegleg had only wandered as far as the stream and had seen nothing. Nothing big, that is.

"Varmints were pretty shy," he reported. "Couldn't get close. I didn't take glasses, so I only got impressions." He snapped his fingers. "One thing, though, Roscoe. Butterflies. Huge things and no end gaudy. They must have had two-foot wingspreads. You'll have to net them like birds."

"Not if I can help it," I said. "Let Jim Peters and his boys collect. But at least your insects maintain the pattern—Earthlike forms have evolved here. We recognize everything. Nothing is weird. They all look like things we have seen before.

Pegleg nodded.

"Those fish actually seem more likely now. Care to join me tomorrow?"

"I just might," I agreed. "But I never have any luck."

"Then you can watch me," Pegleg said smugly.

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THE Seven Suns lie in a major arm of the galactic spiral and the night sky from our planet was a memorable thing. Stars crowded it, packed into swirls and clusters and strange alignments that would have been unbelievable on Earth. There was no moon, but the landscape showed clearly in the soft light of the myriad stars.

Lindy and I watched it on our own viewscreen, lolling in bed after a comfortable meal. I must have blinked. When I opened my eyes the screen showed the flower-strewn slope with wet dew in golden morning sun. Ten hours without moving! Lindy still slept peacefully beside me. Our intercom was buzzing softly. I flipped the switch.

"As I thought, still sacked out," said Pegleg's voice. "Take nourishment and meet me down by the stream. I'm all set to try those fish."

"Roger," I whispered. "Let my weary spouse sleep."

Pegleg had busied himself collecting local bait. I brought meat strips, but he had an assortment of insectlike forms in a little plastic bag. He was whipping a fiberglass rod and testing his reel when I came up.

"Made to order," he said complacently. "Shadows darted into that deep pool over there when I first got here. Water's full of life."

I was interested in his bait collection. It might have come from any hayfield in North America. Pegleg hooked one bit of bait. It gave a tiny, piercing shriek and expired promptly.

"Well that's different." Pegleg looked a little startled. "If I have to listen to that every time I bait up I'll be reduced to dry flies." But he flipped the bait out into the pool and fished deep. I watched him for a couple of minutes. Nothing.

I threaded one of my meat strips on a hook and tossed it out. Instantly the water boiled. My rod was nearly snatched from my hand and I struck hard to set the hook. I expected a fight—but I didn't get it. My fish darted around the pool. I gave it line. Then it did the completely unexpected. It zipped toward me. I stepped back a couple of strides and it climbed out on a rock. It was a small, glistening humanoid with webbed fingers and toes and a short shiny tail. It stood erect, gulping, and the gill slits along the sides of its neck sealed themselves and became obscure. The creature took a deep breath of air, then proceeded to deliver itself of one of the most versatile strings of profanity I had heard. The words were clear and specific and, since this is a family publication, I won't repeat them here.

The little fellow was beside himself with rage. His blue eyes blazed, his thin lips drew back over even white teeth as the vitriol poured

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out. But after a moment he subsided. He stood on the rock, holding his little four-fingered hands out in front of him. The hook had pinned them together through the webs between the fingers. A dark trickle of blood ran down his arms. Suddenly he looked very tiny, grotesque and pitiful.

"Dirty pool," he said almost reflectively. "Dirty, dirty, dirty pool. Even a waakan wouldn't do a thing like that."

He eyed me, his anger gone. He must have been hurting. But as he realized my strange appearance he became all curiosity.

NOW, as you may know, I'm a fairly hearty chunk of man. My arms and legs are thick. My chest is deep and all visible areas except my face, which I shave, and the top of my head, which I don't, are covered with matted black hair. Lindy and I have gone to parties as Beauty and the Beast—without makeup. Right there I was wearing shorts and sandals, so he got a maximum view.

"Different," he piped. "Like a marat, like a waakan, even like an obit without wings." He studied me calmly now. "Are you going to eat me?"

"Nothing is farther from my mind," I heard myself protesting. "I was fishing for fish. How could I know that something like you would take my bait?"

"Because it is my pool," the little fellow said. "Every pool has a marat. But," he added, "I can see you would not know that."

Pegleg had been standing a few yards away, staring with fascination at the tiny manlike creature. He was reeling in his bait slowly, automatically.

"I'm hearing this, ain't I, Roscoe? I haven't had a seizure of some sort?"

The small humanoid turned toward him.

Pegleg was also wearing shorts and sandals, but his long sinewy body had almost no hair at all. We hardly seemed to belong to the same species. To the marat it must have been confusing. He shook his head. Short, greenish ringlets bobbed and curled around his temples as the sun dried and fluffed them. His features were unformed, coarse, and his eyes glistened with cunning. More and more he looked like a nasty little man.

"You don't look alike," he said, "but you must have migrated together. Why did you come here? Only obits migrate."

"We have come from a great distance," I said. "You couldn't understand. We don't plan to stay long and we mean no harm to any living thing. You must be in pain. Let me take the hook out of your hands."

The marat's bright eyes glittered with suspicion.

"Don't come near me," he warned. "You probably do intend to

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eat me." He held his pinioned hands to his mouth and bit through the leader just behind the hook. "Now," he said, "you cannot hold me. Somehow I will take the metal out of my webs. It is not a bad hurt."

"There's a barb on the hook," I said. "It'll be hard to get out. Better let me do it."

"You mean no harm to any living thing," the marat mimicked. "That is why you put a hook in my pool. That is why the hook has a barb." His little face wrinkled like a monkey's. He turned and slid soundlessly into the stream. We could see a shadow like a darting trout that swiftly vanished under the far bank.

We looked at the gently flowing water, then at each other. Pegleg began to pack up his tackle.

"Whenever I leave geology I'm sorry," he said. "You can explain that little character any time you're ready, Roscoe. Start with the speech. We're a hundred and thirty light-years from the nearest English-speaking community and he gives with more dirty wordies than I know. It ain't no way possible. But I heard it."

"Get used to it," I advised. "I think that's the most easily accounted for thing in this contact. It has been hypothesized for years. Could be we'll be getting chit-chat from other little varmints as well. And maybe big ones. Even the bait screamed when you hooked it."

"He looked like a man," Pegleg said. "Like a blasted pixie out of a fairy book. But let's have the speech hypothesis."

"You heard English," I said, "but if I'm right, he didn't. To him I was speaking marat talk. We were verbalizing meanings and each of us hearing them in his own vocal symbols. The process is partly telepathic. Anyhow, it's an old idea. Naturally I don't know why it works here. But he didn't use dirty words you don't know. You heard the ones you would have used."

Pegleg unjointed his rod. "Well, shame on me," he mumbled. "I should have my mind washed out with soap."

I grinned.

"The thought has occurred to me before."

Pegleg opened his bait bag. The little creatures hopped and flew in all directions.

"Are you actually saying that all the indigenous life forms will be giving us the edges of their tongues? That'll be a switch!"

"May happen," I said.

"I can hardly wait to be called what I am by another one. What are your plans, Roscoe, now that the fishing is all washed up, so to speak?"

"I'll just do a walkabout in the neighborhood," I decided. "You're welcome to come along."

"Uh-uh." Pegleg shook his head and tapped the rock hammer in his

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belt. "Rocks don't talk back—or at least they never have. I'll explore the ledge up the slope and take a few specimens to work on."

"Be happy," I said.

I cached my fishing gear and followed the stream for a while. Woody brush grew thickly here and there. Several species of shrubs mingled and at least one kind was heavy with small, golden plumlike fruit. I speculated as to their edibility, but I didn't sample. There are safer ways of finding out.

My feet were almost automatically following what I would have called a game trail, if I had thought about it. I rounded a clump of the plum bushes and almost ran into him.

I DIDN'T startle him, of course. He had heard and probably smelled me coming. In fact, he was waiting for me. He stood composedly, a huge shaggy hulk eight feet tall, both great forepaws filled with golden fruit and his bearlike muzzle most untidy with juice. His small black eyes looked me over with intelligent interest. He drew back his lips from great yellow fangs and I realized that he was simulating a smile.

"I expected you," he said casually, "but I still don't believe you." His deep voice was smooth and controlled.

I shifted my hand a little guiltily away from my laser gun.

"I'm having trouble believing you—so we're even," I said. "I've seen one of your race before. The thing that puzzles me most is—we can communicate. Sounds like speech, but I suppose that is simpler than the fact."

"Did you think," the big beast growled, "that the superior races of this world would be dull and silent like vada? Like cattle?"

"It isn't that you speak—it's that I can understand. Across this sector of the galaxy that isn't usual, you know."

"No, I don't know. I have never seen an intelligent being with whom I couldn't communicate."

"In English?"

The Dominant, as I thought of him, studied me reflectively. He tossed several plums expertly between those rows of teeth and chewed.

"In meanings, I suppose. You are complex. It is good to feel your mind. This makes your appearance all the more remarkable. You are the first superior form in my experience to resemble the obits and the marats of Gossoon."

"Marat I comprehend," I said. "We met one. It mentioned obits, but I haven't seen any as far as I know."

Again that skinning of yellow fangs that was the creature's version of a smile.

"They are abundant," he said. "They have bright wings and live

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high in trees, where they make small shelters and feed on fruit. They are hard to catch. I rarely taste one."

That shocked me.

"You eat them? I thought it was possible to speak with them. The marat was voluble enough."

"Naturally," said the Dominant scornfully. "It's just that they are lower forms. They have no technology and no scholarship. They are animals, a nice change of diet from vada, which are our staple food."

The calm, measured speech of the great brute was, you may believe, disconcerting.

"Suppose I mention," I said, "that you resemble lower forms on my world. Forms that cannot speak and have no superior awareness at all."

"I can believe it," the Dominant said steadily. "We must speak with you at length. We have not the capacity you obviously have to span galactic distance. Technologically we might, but physically we seem hampered. After a certain time in space we die of a strange sickness. It is a problem we have yet to solve."

"That, I think, is why we are here." I still felt silly talking to the creature, but his intelligence and comprehension were beyond doubt. We had changed our minds too quickly yesterday.

So I told him of the derelict with one of his kind aboard, of how we had turned the ship about until now it was speeding home again.

His small eyes gleamed with interest and curiosity.

"Your ship is very big," he said. "We observed it with wonder as it swung in orbit. Now I reason that it must travel at a multiple of light speed. This troubles my mathematics—but it must be so."

To have a giant bear discussing spaceships and mathematics while inelegantly stuffing fruit into itself was almost too much, but I held on.

"There was only one individual in your ship," I remarked.

The Dominant nodded.

"All that was necessary. We do not grow lonely and by choice we work alone. We prefer much individual space. Only the obits, the marats and the stupid vada and their like stay together in groups. We do not consider it conducive to intellectual progress."

"Yet you say you enjoy the feel of my mind."

"Very much. The feel of another intellect is always good. But when we meet it is for a reason. When the reason has been satisfied we part. To each his own space, his own work, his own pleasures."

I was puzzled and I suppose I showed it.

"There is a contradiction here. You don't live together—yet you make spaceships. This requires materials, shops, sophisticated

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equipment, cooperative effort. It requires an elaborate technology. Would you care to explain?"

The Dominant waved a hairy paw toward the thickly hanging plums.

"The fruits are good food," he invited. "There is nothing in them but harmless carbohydrates and simple proteins. You can probably tolerate them. Ah, yes—the technology. We have it, as you say. But we do not use it to live—only to learn by. We space ourselves so that our environment feeds us. We exchange materials that we need for our experiments and investigations. We share labor for brief periods. But it always good when the laborers return to their own territories. My vada herds would soon grow small if there were many eaters. I hope," he added and he seemed a little concerned, "that your ship can feed its people. You are almost in the middle of my territory."

I could reassure him on the point—and did.

"We couldn't depend on finding food on unknown worlds," I pointed out. "Our supplies will last for years. And even if we used them all we could recycle organic stuffs forever."

"In that case," the Dominant said, "I am glad you are here. We will share knowledge and I will become the best informed waakan on Gossoon."

IT WAS a naive statement and one that went well with the apparently simple life organization of his species. But I wasn't going to take that simplicity without a large grain of salt.

"One of us saw you yesterday, pulling down what I suppose was a vada? Do you hunt down and kill your meat using only your own strength?"

The waakan sat back on his haunches and picked his teeth with a clawed, clever finger.

"How else? If we have not strength to kill our meat we do not deserve to eat. If the vada can avoid us it lives long, eats much vegetation and produces more vada. We eat the slow and stupid ones and there is more grass for those that survive."

"A fair shake for everybody," I agreed. "On my home world, many years ago, a man named Darwin first pointed out how the fittest survive. But I never heard of an intelligent species applying the idea as a life pattern."

The waakan flicked an ear.

"Anything else would be a death pattern," he said.

I forgot that I was speaking to a most unlikely being. He had become an intellect voicing an idea.

"That is oversimplification," I argued. "My race, the race of man, has achieved much and is spreading far. Yet we are destructive. We kill without reason. We don't live as you do."

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"An idea can be cluttered with detail until it loses its shape," the waakan said placidly, "but it remains the same idea. I do not believe that living things can destroy their life sources and continue to live."

While we talked the voices of many people had been reaching us from the fields around the *Stardust*, from along the stream and from far up the slope where, presumably, Pegleg was swinging his hammer against an inoffensive rock ledge. Now I realized that some were close by. So did the Dominant.

"We shall have much talk," the waakan said. "But first I think you had better prepare your people for me. I don't wish to feel the energy of anything like that device that you carry at your hip."

He grinned his terrifying grin, dropped to all fours and literally melted into the brush. He simply vanished. No weasel could have left less spoor, less evidence of its passing.

I plucked a couple of the plums and wandered back down the trail. The fruits were beautiful but their taste was foul. I threw them away. Native biomass is usually not very palatable. I wondered vaguely why the waakan had picked me for contact rather than other *Stardust* crewmen now reveling in the feel of this pleasant world. For I had been selected—no doubt about that. Because of my extra body hair? Did the shaggy creature sense interest, lack of fear? Could it read minds? I didn't have an answer.

I thumbed my belt communicator, got Stony Price and gave him a quick fill-in.

"Pass it around, Stony," I said. "I know everybody knows the rules—but remind them. You saw the dead astronaut. But you can't imagine what a living one looks like, close up. Even a steady set of nerves could get laserhappy."

"Will do," Stony said. "I can believe anything. You heard about my fishing trip?"

I grinned. "You had adventures? What did you catch?"

"Nothing" said Stony Price. "But one climbed out on a rock and cussed me out for trying. And I have not been at Rasmussen's brandy—"

"I know, Stony," I said soothingly. "They're called marats, and they have nasty tempers. The waters hereabouts seem to be full of them. The one I saw looked just like an uncle of mine."

"What a world," Stony grumbled. "Be careful, Roscoe. That pretty sunshine will probably give your wife warts instead of freckles."

I signed off, chuckling.

MAN is an adaptable creature—he can get used to anything. The pattern of the planet Gossoon was falling into place for

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me. Before long, I expected, I would be surprised when anything I met did not greet me with a quip or a dirty word—or, perhaps, a profound philosophical statement.

I considered communicating with Lindy, then decided to hunt up Pegleg before I went back to the ship. I had only walked a couple of miles and my space-softened muscles needed tightening. At one spot the stream spread into wide shallow riffles, so I waded it, put my legs to the slope beyond and had a nice workout before I reached the first of the low cliffs and rugged outcrops that had attracted Pegleg.

I had probably upped my elevation three hundred feet or so. The panorama that spread out below me was both pleasing and informative. The stream wound and meandered and finally lost itself around a flank of the uplift I had climbed. It was mostly tree-bordered, cool and pleasant in the yellow sun. I could look over the patchy brush areas and out to the extensive prairie beyond. The *Stardust* lay inert and prone, a huge, featureless, glittering sausage, her fifteen hundred feet of length blending with and scarcely disturbing the symmetry of the landscape. And nothing else interrupted it at all. I saw no sign of anything the waakan might have built, helpers or no helpers. No sign of the waakan, either.

I could hear voices along the outcrop. Slowly it seeped into my consciousness that they were not familiar voices. No one from the *Stardust* would have spoken in those high, sweet, thin notes. They sounded like the babble of children playing. But occasionally I also heard Pegleg's deeper tones. I slipped around the shoulder of the outcrop and, to use the waakan's statement, I didn't believe what I saw.

Large bright patches of vivid color wavered and fluttered and swept in erratic circles in the air around Pegleg, who was sitting on a big flat stone that had split loose from the ragged wall behind him. His rockbag and hammer lay nearby. The scene was like a convention of giant butterflies, with Pegleg the flower. He did not appear bothered—merely amused.

"If you'd just light somewhere," Pegleg was saying, "and speak one at a time we'd all learn something. Settle down."

THE twittering voices trailed away. The gaudy creatures drifted to nearby rocks or clung to handy tree branches. All save one. It hovered before Pegleg, great wings waving gently, studying him intently. Then it dropped gracefully and perched daintily on his knee.

"You will not harm me," she piped sweetly. She studied him

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with her small head tilted. "You are very beautiful," she said.

A she. There was not the slightest doubt of it. With the mauve and silver, two-foot wings folded back, a tiny naked female, human in all but size, sat and swung diminutive, four-toed feet. She brushed back long dark hair and smiled up at the surprised Pegleg. I knew him. He was embarrassed. He hadn't expected that.

I gave him credit, though—he bounced back strongly. He studied the lovely little being on his knee.

"How do you know I won't harm you?" he demanded.

"Because you like me," she said. "You think I am beautiful and I think you are beautiful. I will go with you to your nest."

The childlike phrasing didn't have the sophistication of the marat. These obviously were simpler beings.

"If you were five or six times the size you are it might be a good offer," Pegleg observed wryly. "Can't you see I'm not like you? I haven't even got wings."

"I know." The little thing shook her perfect head. "You are a strange kind of obit. How can you migrate without wings?"

Pegleg grinned. "I manage"

He looked around, as I was doing, at the colorful little creatures perched all about. With wings folded back they were amazingly like small people. I'd have guessed fourteen, sixteen inches for an average height. Their hair was long and the tiny males had scanty wisps of beard. The color was mostly on the wings and in this no two were alike. Their skins were a golden tan. None wore even a scrap of clothing or ornament.

"I dig," Pegleg said. "You are obits. Right?"

"What else would we be?" A little male with maroon wings spoke in a resonant tenor. "Only obits have wings. You are a different creature and La-ling should not sit against you."

"It was her idea," Pegleg protested. "I'm as innocent as newfallen snow."

All the little creatures shuddered.

"Do not speak of the snow," tiny La-ling said. "We hate it. When it comes we must migrate, for the fruits freeze and the cold winds blow us. When winter comes we must be far along our journey. If the snow catches us we die. We can fly only in warmth and sunshine."

"Amazing." Pegleg looked as nonplused as he ever gets. "Do you know the marats in the water? I don't see how they could migrate. What happens to them in the cold?"

The obits made gestures of disgust.

"The marats are nasty creatures," one said. "We would not care if they froze. They say

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they gather in deep pools or bury themselves far into the mud. But they are always liars. Who knows what they do? They are here when we fly south and they are here when we return."

Pegleg shook his head. Then his narrow face relaxed and he began to chuckle.

"My friend Roscoe is going to be fascinated by you."

"Starting now," I said and moved out into the open.

The obits rose in a colorful, fluttering cloud, their high voices shrilling. La-ling took wing with the rest, but after a moment she dropped back to Pegleg's shoulder and clung tightly to his hair with small four-fingered hands.

I walked forward slowly, smiling and trying to look as innocuous as possible.

"I know you have a girl in every spaceport, Pegleg," I remarked, "but this is ridiculous. Don't you ever turn off the charm?"

"No apologies," Pegleg said. He put up a hand to steady La-ling on his shoulder. "I am a mite embarrassed, though. As you can plainly see, this little lady ain't wearing no lingerie. But it's just the style. Not my idea."

"I must believe you," I said, "because I eavesdropped. Apparently we've been tapped, Pegleg, you and I. The local populaces are attracted to us. I've just been chewing the fat with the resident waakan."

The little obit rocketed from Pegleg's shoulder. She cut the air above us, a mauve and silver streak, hissing like an angry cat. I had really punched the wrong button.

"YOU said the secret word." Pegleg waved at the angrily circling little creature. "Come on down, La-ling. We need you. Nothing will harm you. I promise." He held out an arm and the little thing drifted sulkily down. She teetered lightly on the arm, then walked along it to the shoulder again. Her golden eyes were fixed widely on me. Her lips writhed back over tiny sharp teeth, glistening white. She looked less human, then, and more like the small winged animal she was.

"The waakan would eat us," she spat, "but he cannot fly. This one has fur like the waakan, but he looks like an obit. I do not understand."

The last was a whimper. Again she dug her little fingers into Pegleg's hair.

Pegleg raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

"The waakan is the astronaut," I explained. "Or rather, the astronaut's brother or cousin. The teeth are for real, but they just use them for legitimate food, apparently. He did mention a taste for obits."

"Cruel, wicked creature," La-ling said indignantly.

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"He can't catch you," I said soothingly. "Nothing can fly like an obit."

She waved her wings and looked pleased.

"He is very wise, though. He does most wonderful things. We watch him from the trees."

"Interesting," I commented. "And where does he do those wonderful things, La-ling? Does he have a nest?"

The other obits of the flock had floated down cautiously and were again perched about on the rocks and branches.

"The waakan's nest is very large and is made all of stones. Many waakan came and they stuck the stones together with a strange mud."

"And where," I urged, "is this nest?"

All the little creatures giggled like children, a whole chorus of high-pitched sounds. They faced down the slope. All were pointing with small forefingers.

"You have no eyes," one chuckled. "See, it grows out of the hillside."

And it did. I could have kicked myself. What seemed a long ridge abutting the slope was actually artificial. Huge irregular stones had been fitted cunningly together, partly covered over with soil and masked with golden vegetation. The very size of this, the building we had looked for in vain from space, pretty well guaranteed some advanced construction techniques. The ridge was easily a hundred yards long.

"Now we're getting somewhere. Let's visit, Pegleg."

"Well as long as you can vouch for your friends," Pegleg said. "But these little people had better fly away home."

"I imagine they know what they can do. Where does the waakan enter his nest, La-ling?"

"Many places," said the little obit. "He pushes away the stones."

"Many places," the obits chorused.

As we strode down the slope they rose like a flock of butterflies, wavering higher and higher. La-ling fluttered above Pegleg's head, but when we were close to the ridge she sailed after the others and disappeared from sight.

Pegleg asked sourly, "Wasn't it you who commented on how natural everything is here?"

"You expect small differences," I grinned. "Wait till you chat with the waakan."

"I can hang on," Pegleg said dryly. "Indefinitely if necessary."

A thorough search along the great stone structure revealed several places where the stones were not mortared but we could move none of them. We realized that, like it or not, we would have to adjust ourselves to the waakan's pleasure. He was not yet receiving guests.

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VI

WHEN Lindy worked in her lab, directing her three young associates in the complex of cultures and surveys that a touchdown always brought, she was every serious inch Dr. Linda Kissinger, microbiologist without peer. But out in the field with me she was a happy, glowing young woman—living right now. And in the several days that followed she was with me a lot. She was—and is—the closest thing to a galactic sociologist I've ever known. She's everything's friend.

The obits delighted her. She soon had them around her in swarms. She coaxed marats out of pools. And always we were waiting for the waakan.

I knew he would appear when he was ready. In retrospect I think he was giving us time to orient ourselves, to adjust to the arrangement of things on his planet. He gave us a week.

One morning he showed up in the meadow just beyond the *Stardust*. Nobody saw him come. Someone simply happened to notice him through a viewport, sitting on his haunches among the yellow flowers, casually grooming his fur—with his tongue! In a matter of minutes the entire ship was watching.

"He's your friend, Dr. Kissinger." Johnny Rasmussen used the intercom, a thing he rarely does. "I suggest you represent us. We wouldn't like to startle him with numbers."

I was still in my quarters. I grinned as I punched the reply button.

"Will do, Johnny. I think you're being unduly careful of his feelings, though. He knows the score. You're dealing with an intellect that, in its way, is as sharp as anybody's aboard this ship. Start thinking in those terms."

"I'll try," Rasmussen said dryly.

A few minutes later I activated a personnel port and strolled out across the meadow. The waakan watched me come. Behind me, I knew, a dozen lasers were trained steadily on the big beast. I was pretty sure he knew it, too.

"I thought it would be you," he greeted me. "I must appear rather frightening to your race."

"A little," I admitted. "Look at their side. You're big, strong—and obviously a carnivore. Similar forms on our home planet are fierce and dangerous."

The big fellow rolled to all fours, shook himself, stood erect. He stretched his great arms wide, threw back his heavy head and yawned—a long satisfying yawn with a terrifying display of yellow fangs. It was no accident that he happened to be facing the ship.

His little black eyes twinkled with real amusement.

"Just to give the watchers something to watch," he said.

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"Be glad," I said, "that the watchers don't panic easily. There's enough energy trained on you to wipe out half this landscape."

The waakan sat on his haunches again.

"I've never doubted it," he said soberly. "That display was a little stupid. I imagine I depended on the fact that you were protection. I'm sure you've prepared them for me."

"If not, you have." I grinned as I tapped the small communicator unit on my belt. "This is a sound transfer device. Everyone on the ship hears us perfectly."

"A mechanical communicator?" The waakan peered at the small unit with interest. "Clever. I deduce that this is necessary for you species. You don't, then, communicate mentally?"

"Not effectively. We may have latent ability, but we've never developed it." I turned and gestured toward the starship. "Dr. Johannes Rasmussen is the director of our activities, the coordinator of what we do. He is watching. Would you care to speak to him?"

I could feel the serious graciousness of the waakan.

"Dr. Rasmussen," he said politely. "It will be a pleasure to touch minds with you. During this small time we have watched the work of your people—and we are not displeased. You are superior beings. We will help you learn and will hope to learn from you as well. Is this reasonable?"

"Very reasonable. We do thank you. Dr. Kissinger will bring you on board the *Stardust*, if you will come."

The waakan rolled back his lips in that frightening grin.

"Later, perhaps. I am more comfortable out here with plants around me and the sun's rays on me. Remember that I, too, have adjustments to make. We have speculated on advanced cultures on other worlds, but the reality requires getting used to. I think you understand this."

"Perfectly," Rasmussen assured him. "I'll come out to you."

I WON'T detail the events of those data-gathering weeks on Gossoon. But the waakan cooperated and, as he had said, we both learned. We did indeed. We learned a lot.

We learned, for instance, that the continual use of "we" by the waakan was neither editorial nor, as Mark Twain remarked centuries ago, a use permissible when a man had a tapeworm. The waakan was a unit in a telepathic network that included—or could include in time of need—every member of his race. Let me qualify that. His telepathic participation was at his own option. Any individual had a fairly limited practical range and usually communicated directly only

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with waakan on adjacent territories.

But by a sort of pass-it-on technique news could spread with amazing speed. Messages could be sent, too, from specialist to specialist via the minds of intervening waakan whose concerns might be entirely different. This depended, of course, on the availability and good humor of the waakan involved. Even in telepathy one could get a busy signal.

Still, this made their isolated living habit more practical. They could be together without being together, if you follow.

I made good use of such time as remained. During those pleasant summer days I roamed a study area, a hundred-mile section around the spaceship. Lindy had her own work now, so I was usually alone. I traveled by jumper. I came to know the territories of twenty waakan and to be welcome in twenty rock houses. And the machinery, the equipment, the complicated apparatus in each house—even to list them would be both confusing and pointless here. They are of record. (*ISC Annals, Vols. 79-80-81, A. D. 2121. The Log of the Stardust.*

Occasionally Pegleg joined me. Then we used his jeep and rode at ease over the sometimes rough terrain. But he was never comfortable with the big Dominants. His first impression bade fair to be pretty lasting.

"Creatures that understand the movements of the galaxy and yet don't know cookery—creatures that can quote the substance of Avogadro's Law and yet have no names— This is a mixed-up world, Roscoe."

" 'Only the lower forms have names.' " I quoted our resident waakan. "Actually, the waakan don't need them. Apparently each has his or her own mental signal, his own telepathic identity. They can't be verbalized, so we're handicapped. But they're not."

This day Pegleg was expertly wheeling the jeep into a long detour across the prairie, mainly to avoid stampeding a small herd of vada in the middle distance. It was important to each waakan's survival that his food supply not wander. So we tried to be as considerate as we could.

"Captain Jules is bringing in the waakan ship," I remarked. "Johnny's all squared away with the fuzzy space boys. They'll set it down in the builder's territory and all interested parties can check it over at leisure."

The ship had been in orbit for more than two weeks while *Stardust* engineers conferred with the waakan who were concerned with space. And they weren't many. Our thinking there had been far too broad, far too comprehensive.

"How fourteen bears could build a spaceship, solve basic problems

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and actually launch it I still don't see," Pegleg grumbled.

We had made it around the vada, which stood in a tight clump, heads up, watching us.

"They aren't bears," I reminded, "and it wasn't one spaceship. It was three. Two waakan had already sickened in high orbit before our friend in the specimen lockers took his trip. The orbiting ships were brought down safely by their dying pilots."

"I know. I've seen them," Pegleg said. "Carbons of the one that gave us our anxious moments. But why did our boy take off for the next planet when his kind couldn't even stay alive in orbit?"

"They hypothesized that the orbiting was lethal. Why, I don't know. They were wrong, of course. Apparently he died exactly like the others."

"They've got a problem," Pegleg said. "I don't really see why they bother. They don't need space."

Later, when I had conversation with our waakan (in my notes he was Waakan Alpha) on the point, his attitude was remarkably similar to Pegleg's.

"Your story of our pilot's dying is one we knew before," the waakan said. "Many of us have concluded that waakan cannot live in space. Our instincts have been sound. We should stay in the surroundings and under the conditions that produced us."

"I don't agree," I objected. "It's simply a problem. Find the difficulty. Work on it. Solve it. That's the Earthman's way."

The waakan grinned his grin but I no longer found it terrifying.

"We are waakan," he said, "and I think I am glad of that. Your temperament is not ours. We enjoy living. You enjoy overcoming."

"A grain of truth," I admitted. "But you are overlooking some things. We enjoy as much as you. You've watched Lindy. Do you have a happier being on Gossoon?"

"She is happy, I grant, but still she is driven. She has taken our space problem to herself." He twitched his ears, rolled his small eyes and grinned. "Did you think that I didn't know?"

"It's her concern," I said. "Just as physics and mechanics are yours. It is to her what your wheels and balances and weights are to you. You are new life forms to us. You have new microforms on you. It's her training to be challenged. That's the interest she has."

The waakan rose to his full towering height and reflectively rubbed his back against a tree.

"I have given her my skin, my hair, my saliva, my excretions and my blood," he said. "I have contributed much to her pleasure."

"You'll be repaid," I assured

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him. "She'll tell you what she learns."

"If she feels that it is right that I should know," said the waakan shrewdly. "I expect nothing. And I should not be content if an off-world being discovered my weaknesses through superior technology. We do have pride, you know."

"Don't anticipate," I advised. "So far she has found nothing to tell."

I HAD hardly noticed, but the mild and pleasant summer was at an end. The golden vegetation was turning brown. The breeze that blew across the stretches of grassland where the vada grazed now had a sting to it. I no longer went around stripped to the waist. A light vest was comfortable. I replaced sandals with shoes.

And the obits were flocking. I was never out of hearing of their plaintive calls.

"They dread the migration," Lindy reported. "It's a risky business even for strong fliers. There are long stretches without good food trees. Many of those little fellows that go south this fall won't be back in the spring."

"Pegleg won't miss them," I said. "La-ling has almost brought geology in this neck of the woods to a complete standstill. It's hard even to collect specimens from a ledge when a little human-type butterfly is swooping around your head and almost getting hit by the hammer."

"Poor little thing," said Lindy. "She has a real problem now. She knows she isn't human, but she still thinks Pegleg is an obit. She's trying to get him to migrate. She insists he could grow wings if he really tried."

We were on one of our last walks, strolling along the stream near the first marat's pool. Obits from farther north were drifting into the trees. Their sweet high voices formed a musical clamor as they made deep inroads on the remaining hanging fruits. They ate anything that ripened, from tiny button-like berries to the plum fruits in the thickets favored by the waakan. It was in autumn that the waakan tasted obit, for the hungry little beings swarmed wherever there was food. I had persuaded our host waakan to forego these delicacies this flocking time. To my surprise, he had been easy to persuade.

"Your woman would be unhappy," he had said, "and this seems to be important to you. Also," he added slyly, "she researches our space problem. I wouldn't wish to interfere with that."

So we "bird-watched" as we strolled, enjoying the endless variety and color of the tiny graceful people that were not people at all. On this planet the true

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people were huge and black and furry, with small black eyes and great yellow fangs.

Lindy put her hand on my arm. Ahead, on a sandy stretch of stream bank in the sun, Pegleg sat. La-ling perched on his shoulder. She stroked his ear and lovingly nuzzled his hair. The debate was still on. We were in plain sight, but we were not noticed, so we listened. Technically, as Lindy pointed out later, we were not snooping.

"You must go, La-ling," Pegleg was saying. "If you wait any longer the flocks before you will eat all the fruit. You yourself told me that late migrants often starve."

"If you stay here the cold will get you," La-ling insisted. "An obit cannot live in the snow."

"Look at me," Pegleg said patiently. "I am many times larger than you. I have no wings. I am not an obit. I am a man, a creature you never saw before this summer. You've seen many of us since. So why do you insist I am like you?"

"You are beautiful," little La-ling said. "We could migrate and have a nest together."

"She's dreaming the Impossible Dream," Lindy murmured in my ear.

"The snow won't harm me," Pegleg said. "I don't have to live on fruits. I can stay here as well as the waakan can."

"You do not wish me in your nest," the little obit said petulantly. "You are wiser than even the brutes of waakan and you could make me large—or you could make yourself small. You simply do not choose."

Pegleg looked baffled. The tiny woman-thing sounded so like the full-sized variety that it must have made him homesick. Then he seemed to have an inspiration.

"I would be most unsatisfactory. See, I come apart!" He swiftly disengaged the magnetic fastenings of his plastic knee and laid the leg aside.

The little obit lifted gently from his shoulder and hovered, her beautiful wings waving slowly. She clapped her tiny hands with delight.

"Oh, lovely! Now remove your head!"

That broke him up. Lindy and I clasped hands and choked with silent laughter while Pegleg's shoulders shook.

"No more," he gasped finally. "If I removed my head I could not watch you—and who knows what you would do? No, you must go now. Rest and fly early tomorrow. See, I have brought you a gift. You'll never have one sweeter."

He took a small red apple from his pouch. The little obit clasped it with both small hands and sniffed it greedily.

"You do like me! You wish me to go, so that when I come back in spring we can have a nest togeth-

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er. Although," she added, "I think you will freeze."

And with that cheery pronouncement she spread her wings wide and swept higher and higher in an ever-expanding spiral, the precious apple held tightly against her small body. In a moment she was a tiny speck against the evening sky. Pegleg was sober again as he snapped his leg into place.

THE next day the trees were empty. The flocks of obits had moved out at first light, winging steadily southward like swallows on Earth. And the yellow sun's rays had a cold glint. The wind quartered toward the north.

"The waakan are shedding fast," I reported. "Have you noticed?" Pegleg had joined Lindy and me as we sat on a jumper platform in the pale sunshine. "They're growing new, thicker coats—and they'll be snow white. They like this, apparently. They're looking forward to it. Winter is a favorite time of year."

"Quoting Alpha, I take it," Pegleg said.

"Quoting a number of them. I've been getting around, you know. Grizzly country will become polar bear country. But the vada winter well on cured vegetation—and the waakan keep busy. And winter has another attraction."

"I suppose I must ask," Pegleg said. "Consider it done."

"Winter is their Time of Joy—their mating season. Just for a little time science takes a back seat. Nobody's solitary and Mother Nature takes over."

"Time of Joy," Lindy said gently. "I like that. I think that is very nicely put. They are superior creatures, after all."

"And when you find out why they die in space they can take their wisdom to the other planets of their system—and eventually to the stars." Pegleg's sarcasm is built in. He doesn't mean it as it sounds, but you have to know him to tolerate it.

"I know how they die," Lindy said quietly. "It wasn't a very big problem. And I don't think they want to take their wisdom to the stars. They're not explorers or crusaders. They want to go on exactly the way they are, learning only for the sake of knowing. They don't really want to travel anywhere."

"So you don't plan to tell them how they die?"

She shrugged.

"I couldn't if I wanted to. ISC rules would not let me. When I was sure I talked to Johnny. He agrees. They must develop their own space initiative, meet their own challenges. Not until they've done so can they compete with other civilizations, other cultures. Now they don't even inter-

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act with the dominant species on their own borders."

"They adjusted to us," Pegleg said.

"We haven't disturbed their life patterns. We came to them. They recognized our technological achievements and admire us for them. But they'll be glad when we're gone."

Lindy leaned back comfortably against my shoulder. I put an arm around her waist and she locked her fingers with mine.

"I won't tell anybody," I said, "and Pegleg is, appropriately, as deaf as a stone. Why do the waakan die in space?"

Lindy sighed.

"Such a simple thing! They have on their fur a little protist, a bacterium-like organism that lives on grease and sweat. Perfectly harmless and normal. Every skin has a saprobe population. But in space something happens to their variety, something probably related to radiation. It becomes a virulent parasite, changing form and migrating through the skin into nerve tissues and on to the brain, multiplying enormously as it goes. It immobilizes brain cells, making them insensitive, quiescent. The affected creature doesn't suffer. It simply lies down quietly and finally sleeps. Never to awaken—you see?"

"Wouldn't it help to give them at least a clue?" Pegleg asked. He didn't question Lindy's data. He knew she knew.

"Interference," I reminded him. "International Space Council rule, as she said. And the most basic one in the mandate by which we operate. We can advise, but not provide information. You know that."

Pegleg nodded.

"Right. It's up to them."

"In a way, this is the nice time of their history," Lindy mused. "The satisfying, predictable log of the seasons. When snow flies they'll be happy in their thick white coats, happy in their Time of Joy. Spring will come. The marats will emerge from hibernation. The obits will come back from the south. There will be new foliage on the trees, new grass for the vada, new blossoms and new fruit. There will be more food and learning and pleasure. Is there much else? What's life about, anyway?"

"They need maturing time." I took it up. "They'll progress, slowly. Perhaps by the time they conquer their space sickness—and develop better fuels and more efficient drives—they'll be more nearly ready to reach out toward the expanding cultures of Earth and, I doubt not, worlds we still don't know."

"It'll take millennia," Pegleg said.

"So far as I know, there's no hurry," I said. "They have all the time there is." ★

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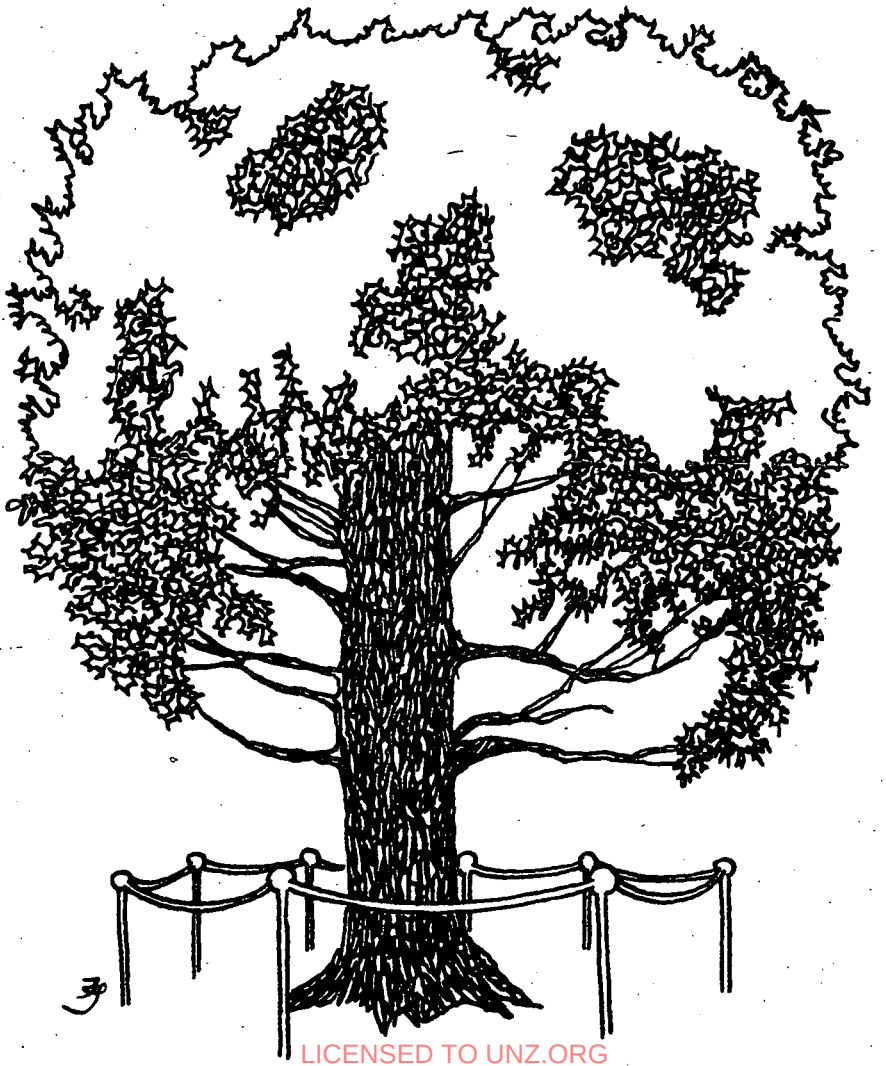
AUTUMNTIME



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Now if the lad were willing to buck the establishment and could find a patch of soil . . .

I SAW my first tree today. Dad finally broke down and took us to East Boston Urban Center 3 after Mom had been harping on it for the past two weeks. I think he was glad we went after all because he was smiling quietly all during the trip back.

Dad used to tell me stories about the trees that still existed when he was a boy. There weren't very many even then, with the Urbanization Program in full swing, but most people had seen at least one tree by the time they started school. It wasn't like nowadays, at any rate. Oh, I've seen the plastic trees; practically every street has a few of them. But you can tell the plastic ones are artificial just from looking at pictures in the microdot library. And now, after seeing a real tree, I can say for sure that the artificial ones aren't the same at all.

This morning when we got up the house was all excited. Mom dialed a light breakfast of toast and synthetic milk so that we wouldn't waste time eating. And when we finished the three of us took an elevator-bus up to the fourth level, where we caught the air track to Brooklyn. From there we took another elevator-bus down to main level, rode the monorail to Intercity Subway Station 27, and caught the second sublevel AA train to Boston. Our expectations were so high that Dad and I didn't mind it when Mom told us again how the tree was discovered.

The O'Brien home was one of the few examples of old-style wooden structures that hadn't been demolished in Boston's urban renewal campaign at the turn of the century. The family had been able to avoid this because of its wealth and political influence and the house was passed on through several generations to the present. Old man O'Brien had no heirs, so when he died the family home went up for auction and the Urban Center bought it. When local officials arrived for an appraisal they discovered that the house had a back yard, which is forbidden by zoning restrictions.

In the yard was a live tree—an oke was what Mom called it.

When the news of the tree's discovery leaked out quite a few sightseers stopped by to have a look at it and the local government, realiz-

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ing the money-making potential, began charging admission and advertising the place. By now it had become a favorite spot for school field trips and family excursions such as ours.

When we arrived in main Boston we rode the elevator-bus up to ground level and caught a monorail out to East Boston Urban Center 3. An air-cush taxi took us the rest of the way to the residence.

The home itself was unimpressive. It had none of the marble gloss or steely sheen of modern buildings, but was rather a dull white color, with the paint peeling in places. Dad paid the admission fee and we spent the next fifteen minutes on a dull guided tour of the house. The rooms were roped off to keep people from touching anything, but there were no windows facing the illegal back yard anyway, so it really didn't matter that I couldn't enter the rooms on that side.

My mind was on the tree and I thought the inside tour would never end, but soon we were walking through a doorway hidden in one of the bookshelves and into the back yard. The yard was big—at least ten by twenty feet—and I was surprised to find real grass growing on the sides of the concrete walkway built for tourists. The grass didn't distract me for long, however, because I just couldn't help noticing the tree!

It was located at one end of the yard and there was a mesh fence around it for protection. It was similar in form to the plastic trees I'd seen, but there was much more to it than that. You could see details more intricate than in any man-made plant. And it was alive. Long ago someone had carved their initials in the bark and you could see where the wound had healed. But best of all was the smell. It was a fresh, living odor, alien to the septic world outside with all its metal, plastic and glass. I wanted to touch the bark, but the fence prevented me from doing so. Mom and Dad just breathed deeply and stared up with smiles on their faces. The three of us stood there for a moment and then the tour guide told us to make room for the next group. I didn't want to go—in fact, I almost felt like crying.

On the way back Mom and Dad were silent and I read through one of the brochures the guide had passed out. When I came to the part that said the O'Brien home would be open only for the rest of this year I was sad. They intend to tear down the place to make room for some kind of insurance building and the tree will have to go, too.

For the rest of the trip I just sat still, fingering the object in my pocket which I had picked off the grass in the O'Brien's back yard. I think it's called an acorn. ★

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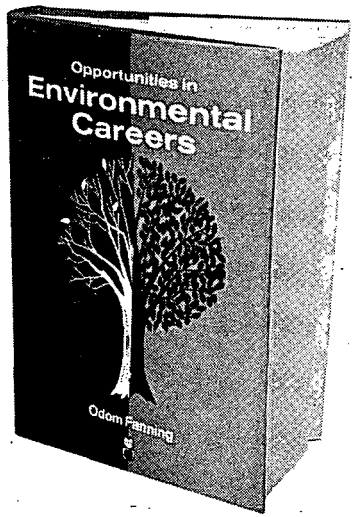

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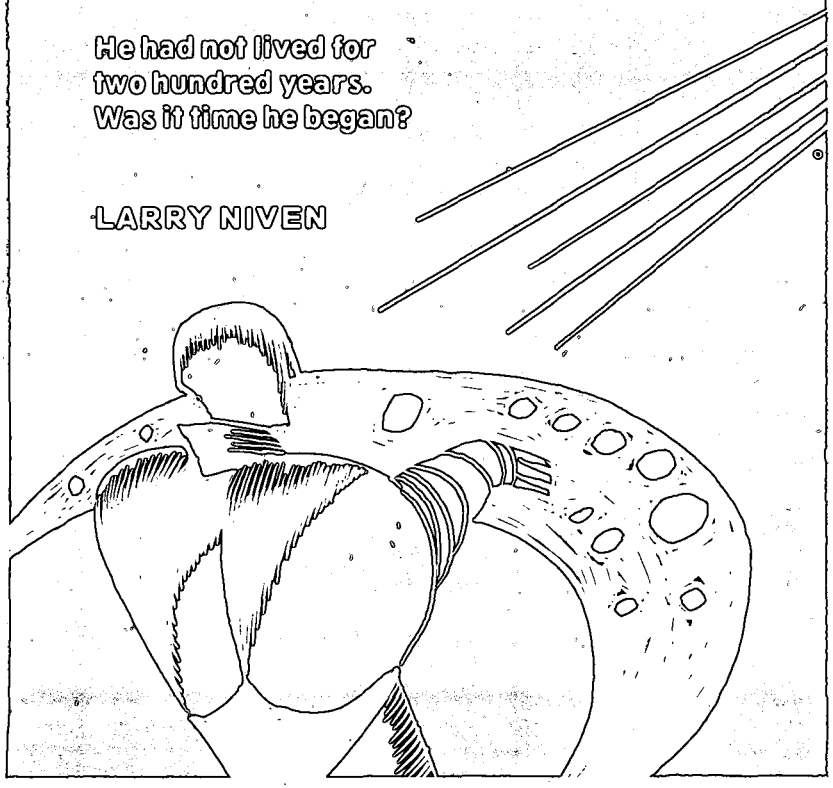
RAMMER

He had not lived for two hundred years. Was it time he began?

LARRY NIVEN



ONCE there was a dead man.

He had been waiting for two hundred years inside a coffin whose outer shell held liquid nitrogen. There were frozen clumps of cancer all through his frozen body. He had had it bad.

He was waiting for medical science to find him a cure.

He waited in vain. Most vari-

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eties of cancer could be cured now, but no cure existed for the billions of cell walls ruptured by expanding crystals of ice. He had known the risk when he took it and had gambled anyway. Why not? He had been dying.

The vaults held millions of frozen bodies. Why not? They too, had been dying.

LATER there was a criminal. His name is forgotten and his crime is secret, but it must have been a terrible one. The State wiped his personality for it.

Afterward he was a dead man: still warm, still breathing, even reasonably healthy—but empty.

The State had use for an empty man.

CORBETT awoke on a hard table, aching as if he had slept too long in one position. He stared incuriously at a white ceiling. Memories floated back to him of a double-walled coffin and sleep and pain.

The pain was gone.

He sat up at once.

And flapped his arms wildly for balance. Everything felt wrong. His arms would not swing right. His body was too light. His head bobbed strangely on a thin neck. He reached frantically for the nearest support, which turned out to be a blond young man in a white jumpsuit. Corbett missed—his arms were shorter than he had expected. He toppled to his side, shook his head and sat up more carefully.

His arms. Scrawny, knobby—and not his.

The man in the jumpsuit asked, "Are you all right?"

"Yah," said Corbett. His throat was rusty, but that was all right. His new body didn't fit, but it didn't seem to have cancer, either. "What's the date? How long has it been?"

A quick recovery. The checker gave him a plus. "Twenty-one ninety, your dating. You won't have to worry about our dating."

That sounded ominous. Cautiously Corbett postponed the obvious question: *What's happened to me?* and asked instead, "Why not?"

"You won't be joining our society."

"No? What, then?"

"Several professions are open to you—a limited choice. If you don't qualify for any of them we'll try someone else."

Corbett sat on the edge of the hard operating table. His body seemed younger, more limber, definitely thinner. He was acutely aware that his abdomen did not hurt no matter how he moved.

He asked, "And what happens to me?"

"I've never learned how to answer that question. Call it a matter of metaphysics," said the checker. "Let me detail what's

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happened to you so far and then you can decide for yourself."

THERE was an empty man. Still breathing and as healthy as most of society in the year twenty-one ninety. But empty. The electrical patterns in the brain, the worn paths of nervous reflexes, the memories, the personality of the man had all been wiped away.

And there was this frozen thing.

"Your newstapers called you people corpsicles," said the blond man. "I never understood what the tapes meant."

"It comes from popsicle. Frozen sherbet." Corbett had used the word himself before he had become one of them. One of the corpsicles, frozen dead.

Frozen within a corpsicle's frozen brain were electrical patterns that could be recorded. The process would warm the brain and destroy most of the patterns, but that hardly mattered, because other things must be done too.

Personality was not all in the brain. Memory RNA was concentrated in the brain but it ran all through the nerves and the blood. In Corbett's case the clumps of cancer had to be cut away—then the RNA could be extracted from what was left. The operation would have left nothing like a human being. More like bloody mush, Corbett gathered.

"What's been done to you is not the kind of thing we can do twice," said the checker. "You get one chance and this is it. If you don't work out we'll terminate and try someone else. The vaults are full of corpsicles."

"You mean you'd wipe my personality," Corbett said unsteadily. "But I haven't committed a crime. Don't I have any rights?"

The checker looked stunned. Then he laughed. "I thought I'd explained. The man you think you are is dead. Corbett's will was probated long ago. His widow—"

"Damn it, I left money to myself! A trust fund!"

"No good." Though the man still smiled, his face was impersonal, remote, unreachable. A vet smiles reassuringly at a cat due to be fixed. "A dead man can't own property—that was settled in the courts long ago. It wasn't fair to the heirs. It took the money out of circulation."

Corbett jerked an unexpectedly bony thumb at his bony chest. "But I'm alive now"

"Not in law. You can earn your new life; the State will give you a new birth certificate and citizenship if you give the State good reason."

Corbett sat for a moment, absorbing that. Then he got off the table. "Let's get started then. What do you need to know about me?"

"Your name."

"Jerome Corbett."

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"Call me Pierce." The checker did not offer to shake hands. Neither did Corbett, perhaps because he sensed the man would not respond, perhaps because they were both noticeably overdue for a bath. "I'm your checker. Do you like people? I'm just asking. We'll test you in detail later."

"I get along with the people around me but I like my privacy."

The checker frowned. "That narrows it more than you might think. This isolationism you called privacy was, well, a passing fad. We don't have the room for it—or the inclination either. We can't send you to a colony world—"

"I might make a good colonist."

"You'd make terrible breeding stock. Remember, the genes aren't yours. No. You get one choice, Corbett. Rammer."

"Rammer?"

"'Fraid so."

"That's the first strange word you've used since I woke up. In fact—hasn't the language changed at all? You don't even have an accent."

"Part of the job. I learned your speech through RNA training. You'll learn your trade the same way if you get that far. You'll be amazed how fast you can learn with RNA shots to help you along. But you'd better be right about liking your privacy, Corbett. Can you take orders?"

"I was in the army."

"What does that mean?"

"Yes."

"Good. Do you like strange places and faraway people—or vice versa?"

"Both." Corbett smiled hopefully. "I've raised buildings all over the world. Can the world use another architect?"

"No. Do you feel that the State owes you something?"

There could be but one answer to that. "No."

"But you had yourself frozen. You must have felt that the future owed you something."

"Not at all. It was a good risk. I was dying."

"Ah." The checker looked him over thoughtfully. "If you had something to believe in, perhaps dying wouldn't mean so much."

Corbett said nothing.

THEY gave him a short word-association test in English. The test made Corbett suspect that a good many corpsicles must date from near his own death. They took a blood sample, then exercised Corbett to exhaustion on a treadmill and took another blood sample. They tested his pain threshhold by direct nerve stimulation—excruciatingly unpleasant—and took another blood sample. They gave him a Chinese puzzle and told him to take it apart.

Pierce then informed him that the testing was over.

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"After all, we already know the state of your health."

"Then why the blood samples?"

The checker looked at him for a moment. "You tell me."

Something about that look gave Corbett the creepy feeling that he was on trial for his life. The feeling might have been caused only by the checker's rather narrow features, his icy blue gaze and abstracted smile. Still—Pierce had stayed with him all through the testing, watching him as if Corbett's behavior were a reflection on Pierce's judgment. Corbett thought carefully before he spoke.

"You have to know how far I'll go before I quit. You can analyze the blood samples for adrenalin and fatigue poisons to find out just how much I was hurting, just how tired I really was."

"That's right," said the checker.

Corbett had survived again.

He would have given up much earlier on the pain test. But at some point Pierce had mentioned that Corbett was the fourth corpsicle personality to be tested in that empty body.

HE REMEMBERED going to sleep that last time, two hundred years ago.

His family and friends had been all around him, acting like mourners. He had chosen the coffin, paid for vault space and made out his Last Will and Testament, but he had not thought of the happening as dying. It had not felt like dying. He had been given a shot. The eternal pain had drifted away in a soft haze. He had gone to sleep.

He had done so wondering about the future, wondering what he would wake to. A vault into the unknown. World government? Interplanetary spacecraft? Clean fusion power? Strange clothing, body paints, nudism?

Or crowding, poverty, all the fuels used up, power provided by cheap labor? He had thought of those, but it was all right. They would not be able to afford to wake him if they were that poor. The world he dreamed of in those last moments was a rich world, able to support such luxuries as Jerome Corbett.

It looked as if he weren't going to see too damn much of it.

A guard led Corbett away after the testing. He walked with a meaty hand wrapped around Corbett's thin upper arm. Leg irons would have been no more effective had Corbett thought of escaping. The guard took him up a narrow plastic staircase to the roof.

The noon sun blazed in a blue sky that shaded to yellow, then brown at the horizon. Green plants grew in close-packed rows on parts of the roof. Elsewhere many sheets of something glassy were exposed to the sunlight.

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Corbett caught one glimpse of the world from a bridge between two roofs. It was a cityscape of close-packed buildings, all of the same cold cubistic design. Corbett was impossibly high on a walk that was concrete, to be sure, but that had no guard rails at all. So Corbett stopped breathing, stopped walking.

The guard did not speak. He tugged at Corbett's arm, not hard, and watched to see what he would do. Corbett pulled himself together and walked on.

THE room was all bunks—two walls of bunks with a gap between. The light was cool and artificial, but outside it was nearly noon. Could they be expecting him to sleep?

The room was big, a thousand bunks big. Most of the bunks were full. A few occupants watched incuriously as the guard showed Corbett which bunk was his. It was the bottommost in a stack of six. Corbett had to drop to his knees and roll to get into it. The bedclothes were strange, silky and very smooth, even slippery—the only touch of luxury in that place. But there was no top sheet, nothing to cover him. He lay on his side, looking out at the dormitory from near floor level.

Three things were shocking about that place.

One was the smell. Apparently perfumes and deodorants had been another passing fad. Pierce had been overdue for a bath. So was Corbett's new self. Here the smell was rich.

The second was the double bunks, four of them in a vertical stack, wider than the singles and with thicker mattresses. The doubles were for loving, not sleeping. What shocked Corbett was that they were right out in the open, not hidden by so much as a gauze curtain.

The same was true of the toilets.

How can they live like this?

Corbett rubbed his nose and jumped—and cursed at himself for jumping. It was the third time he had done so. His own nose had been big and fleshy and somewhat shapeless. But the nose he now rubbed automatically when trying to think was small and narrow with a straight, sharp edge. He might very well get used to the smell and everything else before he got used to his own nose.

Some time after dusk a man came for him. A broad, brawny type wearing a gray jumper and a broad expressionless face, the guard was not one to waste words. He found Corbett's bunk, pulled Corbett out by one arm and led him stumbling away. Corbett was facing Pierce before he was fully awake.

In annoyance he asked, "Doesn't anyone else speak English?"

"No," said the checker.

Pierce and the guard guided Cor-

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bett to a comfortable armchair facing a wide curved screen. They put padded earphones on him. They set a plastic bottle of clear fluid on a shelf over his head. Corbett noticed a clear plastic tube tipped with a hypodermic needle.

"Breakfast?"

Pierce missed the sarcasm. "One meal each day—after learning period and exercise." He inserted the hypodermic into a vein in Corbett's arm. He covered the wound with a blob of what might have been silly putty.

Corbett watched it all without emotion. If he had ever been afraid of needles the months of pain and cancer had worked it out of him. A needle was surcease, freedom from pain for a time.

"Learn now," said Pierce. "This knob controls speed. The volume is set for your hearing. You may replay any section once. Don't worry about your arm—you can't pull the tube loose."

"There's something I wanted to ask you, only I couldn't remember the word. What's a rammer?"

"Starship pilot."

Corbett studied the checker's face. "You're kidding."

"No. Learn now." The checker turned on Corbett's screen and went away.

II

A RAMMER was the pilot of a starship.

The starships were Bussard ramjets. They caught interstellar hydrogen in immaterial nets of electromagnetic force, guided and compressed and burned the hydrogen for thrust. Potentially there was no limit at all on their speed. They were enormously powerful, enormously complex, enormously expensive.

Corbett found it incredible that the State would trust so much value, such devastating power and mass to one man. To a man two centuries dead! Why, Corbett was an architect, not an astronaut. It was news to him that the concept of the Bussard ramjet predated his own death. He had watched the Apollo XI and XIII flights on television and that had been the extent of his interest in spaceflight until now.

Now his life depended on his "rammer" career. He never doubted it. That was what kept Corbett in front of the screen with the earphones on his head for fourteen hours that first day. He was afraid he might be tested.

He didn't understand all he was supposed to learn. But he was not tested either.

The second day he began to get interested. By the third day he was fascinated. Things he had never understood—relativity and magnetic theory and abstract mathematics—he now grasped intuitively. It was marvelous!

And he ceased to wonder why

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the State had chosen Jerome Corbett. It was always done this way. It made sense, all kinds of sense.

The payload of a starship was small and its operating lifetime was more than a man's lifetime. A reasonably safe life-support system for one man occupied an unreasonably high proportion of the payload. The rest must go for biological package probes.

As for sending a citizen, a loyal member of the State—what for? The times would change enormously before a starship could return. The State itself might change beyond recognition. A returning rammer must adjust to a whole new culture—with no way of telling in advance what it might be like.

Why not pick a man who had already chosen to adjust to a new culture? A man whose own culture was two centuries dead before the trip started?

And a man who already owed the State his life?

The RNA was most effective. Corbett stopped wondering about Pierce's dispassionately possessive attitude. He began to think of himself as property being programed for a purpose.

And he learned. He skimmed microtaped texts as if they were already familiar. The process was heady. He became convinced that he could rebuild a ramship with his bare hands, given the parts. He had loved figures all his life, but abstract mathematics had been beyond him until now. Field theory, monopole field equations, circuitry design. When to suspect the presence of a gravitational point "scource"—how to locate it, use it, avoid it.

The teaching chair was his life. The rest of his time—exercise, dinner, sleep—seemed vague, uninteresting.

HE EXERCISED with about twenty others in a room too small for the purpose. Like Corbett, the others were lean and stringy, in sharp contrast to the brawny wedge-shaped men who were their guards. They followed the lead of a guard, running in place because there was no room for real running, forming precise rows for scissors jumps, pushups, situps.

After fourteen hours in a teaching chair Corbett usually enjoyed the jumping about. He followed orders. And he wondered about the stick in a holster at the guard's waist. It looked like a cop's baton. It might have been just that—except for the hole in one end. Corbett never tried to find out.

Sometimes he saw Pierce during the exercise periods. Pierce and the men who tended the teaching chairs were of a third type: well fed, in adequate condition, but just on the verge of being overweight. Corbett thought of them as Olde American types.

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From Pierce he learned something of the other professions open to a revived corpsicle/reprogramed criminal. Stoop labor: intensive hand cultivation of crops. Body servants. Handicrafts. And easily taught repetitive work. And the hours! The corpsicles were expected to work fourteen hours a day. And the crowding!

He was leading the life now. Fourteen hours to study, an hour of heavy exercise, an hour to eat and eight hours of sleeping in a dorm that was two solid walls of people.

"Time to work, time to eat, time to sleep! Elbow to elbow every minute! The poor bastards," he said to Pierce. "What kind of a life is that?"

"It lets them repay their debt to the State as quickly as possible. Be reasonable, Corbett. What would a corpsicle do with his off hours? He has no social life—he has to learn one by observing citizens. Many forms of corpsicle labor involve proximity to citizens."

"So they can look up at their betters while they work? That's no way to learn. It would take—I get the feeling we're talking about decades of this kind of thing."

"Thirty years' labor generally earns a man his birth certificate. That gets him a right-to-work—which then gets him a guaranteed base income he can use to buy education tapes and shots. And the medical benefits are impressive. We live longer than you used to, Corbett."

"Meanwhile it's slave labor. Anyway, none of this applies to me—"

"No, of course not. Corbett, you're wrong to call it slave labor. A slave can't quit. You can change jobs any time you like. There's a clear freedom of choice."

Corbett shivered. "Any slave can commit suicide."

"Suicide, my ass," the checker said distinctly. If he had anything that could be called an accent it lay in the precision of his pronunciation. "Jerome Corbett is dead. I could have given you his intact skeleton for a souvenir."

"I don't doubt it." Corbett saw himself tenderly polishing his own white bones. But where could he have kept such a thing?

"Well, then. You're a brain-wiped criminal, justly brain-wiped, I might add. Your crime has cost you your citizenship, but you still have the right to change professions. You need only ask for another personality. What slave can change jobs at will?"

"It would feel like dying."

"Nonsense. You go to sleep, that's all. When you wake up you've got a different set of memories."

The subject was an unpleasant one. Corbett avoided it from then on. But he could not avoid talking to the checker. Pierce was the only man in the world he could talk to.

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On the days Pierce failed to show up he felt angry, frustrated.

Once he asked about gravitational point scources. "My time didn't know about those."

"Yes, it did. Neutron stars. You had a number of pulsars located by nineteen-seventy and the math to describe how a pulsar decays. The thing to watch for is a decayed pulsar directly in your path."

"Oh."

Pierce regarded him in some amusement. "You really don't know much about your own time, do you?"

"Astrophysics wasn't my field. And we didn't have your learning techniques." Which reminded him of something. "Pierce, you said you learned English with RNA injections. Where did the RNA come from?"

Pierce grinned and left.

CORBETT did not want to die. He was utterly, disgustingly healthy and twenty years younger than he had been at death. He found his rammer education continually fascinating. If only they would stop treating him like property . . .

Corbett had been in the army, but that had been twenty years before his death. He had learned to take orders, but never to like it. What had galled him then had been the basic assumption of his inferiority. But no Army officer in Corbett's experience had believed in Corbett's inferiority as completely as did Pierce and Pierce's guards.

The checker never repeated a command, never seemed even to consider that Corbett would refuse. If Corbett refused, once, he knew what would happen. And Pierce knew that he knew. No army could have survived in such a state. The attitude better fitted a death camp.

They must think I'm a zombie . . .

Corbett carefully did not pursue the thought. He was a corpse brought back to life—but not all the way.

The life was not pleasant. His last-class citizenship was galling. There was nobody to talk to—nobody but Pierce, whom he was learning to hate. He was hungry most of the time—the single daily meal barely filled his belly and it would not stay full. No wonder he had wakened so lean.

More and more he lived in the teaching chair. Vicariously he became a rammer then and the impotence of his life was changed to omnipotence. Starman! Riding the fire that feeds the suns, scooping fuel from interstellar space itself, spreading electromagnetic fields like wings hundreds of miles out . . .

Two weeks after the State had wakened him from the dead, Corbett was given his course.

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HE relaxed in a chair that was not quite a contour couch. RNA solution dripped into him. The needle no longer bothered him—he never noticed it. The teaching screen held a map of his course, in green lines in three-space. Corbett had stopped wondering how the three-dimensional effect was achieved.

The scale was shrinking as he watched.

Two tiny blobs and a glowing ball surrounded by a faintly glowing corona. This part of his course he already knew. A linear accelerator would launch him from the moon, boost him to Bussard ramjet speeds and hurl him at the sun. Solar gravity would increase his speed while his electromagnetic fields caught and burned the solar wind itself. Then out, still accelerating, to the stars . . .

In the teaching screen the scale shrank horrendously. The distances between stars were awesome, terrifying. Van Maanan's Star was twelve light-years away.

He would begin deceleration a bit past the midpoint. The matching would be tricky. He must slow enough to release the biological package probe—but not enough to drop him below ram speeds. In addition he must use the mass of the star for a course change. There was no room for error here.

Then on to the next target, which was even farther away. Corbett watched—and he absorbed—and a part of him seemed to have known everything all along even while another part was gasping at the distances. Ten stars, all yellow dwarfs of the Sol type, an average of fifteen light-years apart—though he would cross one gap of fifty-two light-years. He would almost touch lightspeed on that one. Oddly enough, the Bussard ramjet effect would improve at such speeds. He could take advantage of the greater hydrogen flux to pull the fields closer to the ship, to intensify them.

Ten stars in a closed path, a badly bent and battered ring leading him back to the solar system and Earth. He would benefit from the time he spent near the speed of light. Three hundred years would pass on Earth, but Corbett would only live through two hundred years of ship's time—which implied some kind of suspended animation technique.

It didn't hit him the first time through—or the second, but repetition had been built into the teaching program. It didn't hit him until he was on his way to the exercise room.

Three hundred years?

Three hundred years!

III

IT wasn't night, not really. Outside it must be midafternoon.

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Indoors, the dorm was always coolly lit, barely brightly enough to read if there had been any books. There were no windows.

Corbett should have been asleep. He suffered every minute he spent gazing out into the dorm. Most of the others were asleep, but a couple made noisy love on one of the loving bunks. A few men lay on their backs with their eyes open and two women talked in low voices. Corbett didn't know the language. He had been unable to find anyone who spoke English.

He suspected that there were two shifts, that someone slept in his bunk, mornings—but he could prove nothing. The slippery sheets must be fantastically easy to clean. Just hose them down.

Corbett was desperately homesick.

The first few days had been the worst.

He had stopped noticing the smell. If something reminded him he could sniff the traces of billions of human beings. Otherwise the odor was part of the environment.

But the loving bunks bothered him. When they were in use he watched. When he forced himself not to watch he listened. He couldn't help himself. But he had turned down two sign-language invitations from a small brunette with straggly hair and a pretty, elfin face. Make love in public? He couldn't.

He could avoid using the loving bunks, but not the exposed toilets. That was embarrassing. The first time he was able to force himself only by staring rigidly at his feet. When he pulled on his jumper and looked up a number of sleepers were watching him in obvious amusement. The reason might have been his self-consciousness or the way he dropped his jumper around his ankles or he may have been out of line. A pecking order determined who might use the toilets before whom. He still hadn't figured out the details.

Corbett wanted to go home.

The idea was unreasonable. His home was gone and he would have gone with it without the corpsicle crypts. But reason was of no use in this instance—he wanted to go home. Home to Miriam, who long since must have died of old age. Home to anywhere: Rome, San Francisco, Kansas City, Hawaii, Brasilia—he had lived in all those places, all different, but all home. Corbett had been a born traveler, "at home" anywhere—but he was not at home here and never would be.

Now they would take here away from him. Even this world of four rooms and two roofs—this world of elbow-to elbow mutes and utter slavery, this world of which he knew nothing—would have vanished when he returned from the stars.

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Corbett rolled over and buried his face in his arms. If he didn't sleep he would be groggy tomorrow. He might miss something essential. They had never tested his training. Read that. *Not yet, not yet . . .*

He dozed.

He came awake suddenly, already up on one elbow, groping for some elusive thought.

Ah.

Why haven't I been wondering about the biological package probes?

A moment later he did wonder.

What are the biological package probes?

But the wonder was that he had never wondered.

He knew what and where they were: heavy fat cylinders arranged around the waist of the starship's hull. Ten of these, each weighing almost as much as Corbett's own life-support system. He knew their mass distribution. He knew the clamp system that held them to the hull and could operate and repair the clamps under various extremes of damage. He almost knew where the probes went when released; it was just on the tip of his tongue—which meant he had had the RNA shot but had not yet seen the instructions.

But he did not know what the probes were for.

It was like that with the ship, he realized. He knew everything there was to know about a seeder ramship, but nothing at all about the other kinds of ramship or interplanetary travel or ground-to-orbit vehicles. He knew that he would be launched by linear accelerator from the moon. He knew the design of the accelerator—he could see it, three hundred and fifty kilometers of rings standing on end in a line across a level lunar mare. He knew what to do if anything went wrong during launch. And that was all he knew about the moon and lunar installations and lunar conquest, barring what he had watched on television two hundred years ago.

What was going on out there? In the two weeks since his arrival (awakening? resuscitation?) he had seen four rooms and two rooftops, glimpsed a fantastic cityscape from a bridge and talked to one man who was not interested in telling him anything. What had happened in two hundren years?

These men and women who slept around him. Who were they? Why were they here? He didn't even know if they were corpsicles or contemporary. Probably contemporary. Not one of them was self-conscious about the facilities.

Corbett had raised his buildings in all sorts of strange places, but he had never jumped blind. He had always brushed up on the language and studied the customs before he went. Here he had no han-

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dle, nowhere to start. He was lost.

If only he had someone he could really talk to!

He was learning in enormous gulps, taking in volumes of knowledge so broad that he hadn't realized how rigidly bounded they were. The State was teaching him only what he needed to know or might need to know some time. Every bit of information was aimed straight at his profession.

Rammer.

He could see the reasoning. He would be gone for several centuries. Why should the State teach him anything at all about today's technology, customs, geography? There would be trouble enough when he came back if he—Come to that, who had taught him to call the government the State? He knew nothing of its power and extent. How had he come to think of the State as all-powerful?

It must be the RNA training. With data came attitudes below the conscious level, where he couldn't get at them.

What were they doing to him?

He had lost his world. He would lose this one. According to Pierce, he had lost himself four times already. A condemned criminal had had his personality wiped four times. Now Corbett's beliefs and motivations were being lost bit by bit to the RNA solution as the State made him over into a rammer.

Was there nothing that was his?

HE failed to see Pierce at exercise period. It was just as well. He was somewhat groggy. As usual, he ate dinner like a starving man. He returned to the dorm, rolled into his bunk and was instantly asleep.

He looked up during study period the next day and found Pierce watching him. He blinked, fighting free of a mass of data on the attitude jet system that bled plasma from the inboard fusion plant that was also the emergency electrical power source—and asked, "Pierce, what's a biological package probe?"

"I would have thought they would teach you that. You know what to do with the probes, don't you?"

"The teaching widget gave me the procedure two days ago. Slow up for certain systems, kill the fields, turn a probe loose and speed up again."

"You don't have to aim them?"

"No, I guess they aim themselves. But I have to get them down to a certain relative velocity to get them into the system."

"Amazing. They must do all the rest of it themselves." Pierce shook his head. "I wouldn't have believed it. Well, Corbett, the probes steer for a terrestrial world with a reducing atmosphere. They outnumber oxygen-nitrogen worlds about three to one in this arm of the galaxy and probably everywhere else, too—as

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you may know, if your age got that far."

"But what do the probes do?"

"They're biological packages. Bacteria. The idea is to turn a reducing atmosphere into an oxygen atmosphere, just the way certain bacteria did it for Earth, something like fifteen-times-ten-to-the-eighth years ago." The checker smiled—barely. His small narrow mouth wasn't built to express any great emotion. "You're part of a big project, Corbett."

"Good Lord. How long does it take?"

"We think about fifty thousand years. Obviously we've never had a chance to measure it."

"But, good Lord! Do you really expect the State to last that long? Does even the State expect to last that long?"

"That's not your affair, Corbett. Still—" Pierce considered—"I don't suppose I do. Or the State does. But humanity will last. One day there will be men on those worlds. It's a Cause, Corbett. The immortality of the species. A thing bigger than one man's life. And you're part of it."

He looked at Corbett expectantly.

Corbett was deep in thought. He was running a finger tip back and forth along the straight line of his nose.

Presently he asked, "What's it like out there?"

"The stars? You're—"

"No, no, no. The city. I catch just a glimpse of it twice a day: cubistic buildings with elaborate carvings at the street level—"

"What the bleep is this, Corbett? You don't need to know anything about Selerdor. By the time you come home the whole city will be changed."

"I know, I know. That's why I hate to leave without seeing something of this world. I could be going out to die—"

Corbett stopped. He had seen that considering look before, but he had never seen Pierce actually angry.

The checker's voice was flat, his mouth pinched tight. "You think of yourself as some kind of tourist."

"So would you if you found yourself two hundred years in the future. If you didn't have that much curiosity you wouldn't be human."

"Granted that I'd want to look around. I certainly wouldn't demand it as a right. Corbett, what were you thinking when you foisted yourself off on the future? Did you think the future owed you a debt? It's the other way around—and time you realized it!"

Corbett was silent.

"I'll tell you something. You're a rammer because you're a born tourist. We tested you for that. You like the unfamiliar—it

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doesn't send you scuttling back to something safe and known. That's rare." The checker's eyes said: *And that's why I've decided not to wipe your personality yet.* His mouth said, "Was there anything else?"

Corbett pushed his luck. "I'd like a chance to practice with a computer like the ship's computer-autopilot."

"We don't have one, but you'll get your chance in two days. You're leaving then."

IV

NEXT day he received his instructions for entering the solar system. He was to try anything and everything to make contact, up to and including flashing his attitude jets in binary code. The teaching widget was fanatical on the subject.

He found that he would not be utterly dependent on rescue ships. He could slow the ramship by braking directly into the solar wind until the proton flux was too slow to help him. He could then proceed on attitude jets, using whatever hydrogen was left in the emergency tank. A nearly full tank would actually get him to the moon and land him there.

The State was through with him when he dropped his last probe. It was good of the State to provide for his return, Corbett thought—and then he shook himself. The State was not altruistic. It wanted the ship back.

Now, more than ever, Corbett wanted a chance at the computer-autopilot.

HE FOUND one more chance to talk to the checker.

"A three-hundred-year round trip—maybe two hundred, ship's time," said Corbett. "I get some advantage from relativity. But, Pierce, you don't really expect me to live two hundred years, do you? With nobody to talk to?"

"The cold sleep treatment—"

"Even so."

Pierce frowned. "You haven't studied medicine. I'm told that cold sleep has a rejuvenating effect over long periods. You'll spend perhaps twenty years awake and the rest in cold sleep. The medical facilities are automatic; I'm sure you've been instructed how to use them. They are adequate. Do you think we'd risk your dying out there between the stars, where it would be impossible to replace you?"

"No."

"Was there anything else you wanted to see me about?"

"Yes." He had decided not to raise the subject—now he changed his mind. "I'd like to take a woman with me. The life-support system would hold two of us easily enough. I worked it out. We'd need another cold sleep chamber, of course."

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For two weeks this had been the only man Corbett could talk to. At first he had found Pierce unfathomable, unreadable, almost inhuman. Since then he had learned to read the checker's face to some extent.

Now he watched Pierce decide whether to terminate Jerome Corbett and start over.

It was a close thing. But the State had spent considerable time and effort on Jerome Corbett. It was worth a try. . . . And so Pierce said, "That would take up some space. You would have to share the rest between you. I do not think you would survive, Corbett."

"But—"

"Look here, Corbett. We know you don't need a woman. If you did you would have taken one by now and we would have wiped you and started over. You've lived in the dormitory for two weeks and you have not used the loving bunks once."

"Damn it, Pierce, do you expect me to make love in public? I can't."

"Exactly."

"But—"

"Corbett, you learned to use the toilet, didn't you? Because you had to. You know what to do with a woman but you are one of those men fortunate enough not to need one. Otherwise you could not be a rammer."

If Corbett had hit the checker then he would have done it knowing that it meant his death. And knowing that, he would have killed Pierce for forcing him to it.

Something like ten seconds elapsed, during which he might have done it. Pierce watched him in frank curiosity.

When he saw Corbett relax he said, "You leave tomorrow, Corbett. Your training is finished. Goodbye."

And Corbett walked out.

THE dormitory had been a test. He knew it now. Could he cross a narrow bridge with no handrails? Then he was not pathologically afraid of falling. Could he spend two hundred years alone in the cabin of a starship? Then the silent people around him, five above his head, thousands to either side, must make him markedly uncomfortable. Could he live two hundred years without a woman? Surely he must be impotent.

He returned to the dorm after dinner. They had replaced the bridge with a slab of grass. Corbett snarled and crossed ahead of the guard—the guard had to hurry to keep up.

He stood between two walls of occupied bunks, looking about him. Then he did a stupid thing.

He had already refrained from killing the checker. He must have decided to live. What he did, then, was stupid. He knew it.

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He looked about him until he found the slender darkhaired girl with the elfin face watching him curiously from near the ceiling. He climbed the rungs between bunks until his face was level with her bunk.

He remembered that the gesture he needed was a quick, formalized one; he didn't know it.

In English he asked, "Come with me?"

She nodded brightly and followed him down the ladder. By then it seemed to Corbett that the dorm was alive with barely audible voices.

The odd one, the rammer trainee.

Certainly a number of the wakeful had turned to lie on their sides to watch.

He felt their eyes on the back of his neck as he zipped open his gray jumpsuit and stepped out of it. The dormitory had been a series of tests. At least two of those eyes must belong to someone who would report to Pierce or to Pierce's bosses. But to Corbett they were just like the others, all the eyes curiously watching to see how the speechless one would make out.

And sure enough, he was impotent. It was the eyes—and he was naked. The girl was first concerned, then pitying. She stroked his cheek in apology or sympathy and then she went away and found someone else.

Corbett lay listening to them, gazing at the bunk above him.

He waited for eight hours. Finally a guard came to take him away. By then he didn't care what they did with him.

HE DIDN'T start to care until the guard's floating jeep pulled up beneath an enormous .22 long cartridge standing on end. Then he began to wonder. It was too small to be a rocket ship.

But it was one. They strapped him into a contour couch, one of three in a cabin with one window. There were the guard type and Corbett and a man who might have been Pierce's second cousin once removed. He had the window. He also had the controls.

Corbett's heartbeat quickened. He wondered how it would be.

It was as if he had suddenly become very heavy. He heard no noise except right at the beginning—a sound like landing gear being raised on an airplane. Not a rocket, Corbett thought—and he remembered the tricks a Bussard ramjet could play with magnetic fields. He was heavy and he hadn't slept a wink last night. He went to sleep.

When he awoke he was in free fall. Nobody had tried to tell him anything about free fall. The guard and the pilot watched him curiously to see what he would do.

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"Screw you," said Corbett.

It was another test. He got the straps open and pushed himself over to the window. The pilot laughed, caught him and held him while he closed a protective cover over the instruments. Then he let go and Corbett drifted before the window.

His belly was revolving eccentrically. His inner ear was going crazy. His testicles were tight up against his groin and that didn't feel good either. He felt as if the elevator cable had snapped. Corbett snarled within his mind and tried to concentrate on the window. But the Earth was not visible. Neither was the moon. Just a lot of stars, bright enough—quite bright in fact—even more brilliant than they had been above a small boat anchored off Catalina Island one night long ago. He watched them for some time.

Trying to keep his mind off that falling elevator.

He wasn't about to get himself disqualified now.

THEY ate aboard in free fall. Corbett copied the others, picking chunks of meat and potatoes out of a plastic bag of stew, pulling them through a membrane that sealed itself behind his pick.

"Of all the things I'm going to miss," he told the broad-faced guard, "I'm going to enjoy missing you most. You and your goddam staring eyes."

The guard smiled placidly and waited to see if Corbett would get sick.

They landed a day after takeoff on a broad plain where the Earth sat nestled in a row of sharp lunar peaks. One day instead of four—the State had expended extra power to get him here. But an Earth-moon flight must be a small thing these days.

The plain was black with blast pits. It must have been a landing field for decades. Enormous transparent bubbles with trees and buildings inside them clustered near the runway end of the linear accelerator, and spacecraft of various types were scattered about the plain.

The biggest was Corbett's ramship: a silver skyscraper lying on its side. The probes were in place, giving the ship a thick-waisted appearance. To Corbett's trained eye it looked ready for takeoff.

Corbett donned his suit first, while the pilot and guard watched to see if he would make a mistake. It was the first time he had seen such a suit off the teaching screen. He took it slowly.

There was an electric cart. Apparently Corbett was not expected to know how to walk on an airless world. He thought to head for one of the domes, but the guard steered straight for the ramship. It was a long way off.

It had become unnervingly

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large when the guard stopped underneath.

The guard said, "Now you inspect your ship."

"You can talk?"

"Yes. Yesterday, a quickie course."

"Oh."

"Three things wrong with your ship. You find all three. You tell me, I tell him."

"Him? Oh, the pilot. Then what?"

"Then you fix one of the things, we fix the others. Then we launch you."

IT WAS another test, of course. Maybe the last. Corbett was furious. He started immediately with the field generators and gradually he forgot the guard and the pilot and the sword still hanging over his head. He knew this ship. As it had been with the teaching chair, so it was with the ship itself. Corbett's impotence changed to omnipotence. The power of the beast, the intricacy, the potential, the—the hydrogen tank held far too much pressure. That wouldn't wait.

"I'll slurry this now," he told the guard. "Get a tanker over here to top it off." He bled gas slowly through the gauge, lowering the fuel's vapor pressure without letting fuel boil out the gauge itself. When he finished the liquid hydrogen would be slushy with frozen crystals under near-vacuum pressure.

He finished the external inspection without finding anything more. It figured; the banks of dials held vastly more information than a man's eyes could read through opaque titanalloy skin.

The airlock was a triple-door type, not so much to save air as to give him an airlock even if he lost a door somehow. Corbett shut the outer door, used the others as green lights indicated he could. He looked down at the telltales under his chin as he started to unclamp his helmet.

Vacuum?

He stopped. The ship's gauges said air. The suit's said vacuum. Which was right? Come to think of it, he hadn't heard any hissing. Just how soundproof was his helmet?

Just like Pierce to wait and see if he would take off his helmet in vacuum. Well, how to test?

Hah! Corbett found the head, turned on a water spigot. The water splashed oddly in lunar gravity. It did not boil.

Corbett doffed his helmet and continued his inspection.

There was no way to test the electromagnetic motors without causing all kinds of havoc in the linear accelerator. He checked out the telltales as best he could, then concentrated on the life-support mechanisms. The tailored plants in the air system were alive

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and well. But the urea absorption mechanism was plugged somehow. That would be a dirty job. He postponed it.

Did a flaw in his suit constitute a flaw in the ship?

He decided to finish the inspection. The State might have missed something. It was his ship, his life.

The cold sleep chamber was like a great coffin, a corpsicle coffin. Corbett shuddered at the sight of it—it reminded him of two hundred years spent waiting in liquid nitrogen. He wondered again if Jerome Corbett were really dead—and then he shook off the wonder and went to work.

No flaw there.

The computer was acting vaguely funny.

He had a hell of a time tracing the problem. There was a minute break in one superconducting circuit, so small that some current was leaking through anyway, by inductance. Bastards. He donned his suit and went out to report.

The guard heard him out, consulted with the other man, then told Corbett, "You did good. Now finish with the topping off procedure. We fix the other things."

"There's something wrong with my suit too."

"New suit aboard now."

"I want some time with the computer," said Corbett. "I want to be sure it's all right now."

"We fix it good. When you top off fuel you leave."

That suddenly, Corbett felt a vast sinking sensation. The whole moon was dropping away under him.

They launched him hard. Corbett saw red before his eyes, felt his cheeks dragged far back toward his ears. The ship would be all right—it was built to stand electromagnetic eddy currents from any direction.

He survived. He fumbled out of his couch in time to watch the moonscape flying under him, receding, a magnificent view.

There were days of free fall. He was not yet moving at ram speeds. But the State had aimed him inside the orbit of Mercury, straight into the thickening solar wind. Protons. Thick fuel for the ram fields and a boost from the sun's gravity.

Meanwhile he had several days. He went to work with the computer.

At one point it occurred to him that the State might monitor his computer work. He shrugged it off. Probably it was too late for the State to stop him now. In any case, he had said too much already.

He finished his work at the computer and got answers that satisfied him. At higher speeds the ram fields were self-reinforcing—they would support themselves and the ship. He could find

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no upper limit to the velocity of a ramship.

With all the time in the world, then, he sat down at the control console and began to play with the ram fields.

They emerged like invisible wings and he felt the buffeting of badly controlled bursts of fusing hydrogen. He kept the fields close to the ship, fearful of losing the balance here, where the streaming of protons was so uneven. He could feel how he was doing—he could fly this ship by the seat of his pants with RNA training to help him.

He felt like a giant. This enormous, phallic, germinal flying thing of metal and fire! Carrying the seeds of life for worlds that had never known life, he roared around the sun and out. The thrust dropped a bit then, because he and the solar wind were moving in the same direction. But he was catching it in his nets like wind in a sail, guiding it and burning it and throwing it behind him. The ship moved faster every second.

This feeling of power, enormous masculine power—it had to be partly RNA training. At this point he didn't care. Part was him, Jerome Corbett.

Around the orbit of Mars, when he was sure that a glimpse of sunlight would not blind him, he opened all the ports. The sky blazed around him. There were no planets nearby and all he saw of the sky was myriads of brilliant pinpoints, mostly white, some showing traces of color. But there was more to see. Fusing hydrogen made a ghostly ring of light around his ship.

It would grow stronger. So far his thrust was low, somewhat more than enough to balance the thin pull of the sun.

He started his turn around the orbit of Jupiter by adjusting the fields to channel the proton flow to the side. That helped this thrust, but it must have puzzled Pierce and the faceless State. They would assume he was playing with the fields, testing his equipment. Maybe. His curve was gradual—it would take them a while to notice.

This was not according to plan. Originally he had intended to go as far as Van Maanan's Star, then change course. That would have given him 2x15=30 years' head start, in case he was wrong, in case the State could do something to stop him even now. Fifteen years for the light to show them his change in course; fifteen more before retaliation could reach him.

It was wise; but he couldn't do it. Pierce might die in thirty years. Pierce might never know he had failed—and that thought was intolerable.

His thrust dropped to almost nothing in the outer reaches of the system. Protons were thin out here. But there were enough to

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Starting in the next issue of IF—

PATTERNS OF CHAOS
Colin Kapp's new novel

. . . a missile fired across the stars to kill a man—eons before he was born . . .

push his velocity steadily higher and that was what counted. The faster he went, the greater the proton flux. He was on his way.

HE WAS beyond Neptune when the voice of Pierce the checker came to him, saying, "This is Peerssa for the State, Peerssa for the State. Answer, Corbett. Do you have a malfunction? Can we help? We cannot send rescue but we can advise. Peerssa for the State, Peerssa for the State—"

Corbett smiled tightly. *Peerssa?* The checker's name had changed pronunciation in two hundred years. Pierce had slipped back to an old habit, RNA lessons forgotten. He must be upset.

Corbett spent twenty minutes finding the moon base with his signal laser. The beam was too narrow to permit sloppy handling.

When he had it adjusted he said, "This is Corbett for himself, Corbett for himself. I'm fine. How are you?"

He spent more time at the computer. One thing had been bothering him: the return. He planned to be away longer than the State would have expected. Suppose there was nobody on the moon when he returned?

It would be a problem, he found. If he could reach the moon on his remaining fuel (no emergencies, remember), he could reach the Earth's atmoshere. The ship was durable; it would stand a meteoric re-entry. But his attitude jets would not land him, properly speaking.

Unless he could cut away part of the ship. The ram field generators would no longer be needed . . . Well, he would work it out somehow. Plenty of time. Plenty of time.

The answer took nine hours. "Peerssa for the State. Corbett, we don't understand. You are way off course. Your first target was to be Van Maanan's Star. Instead you seem to be curving around toward Sagittarius. There is no known Earthlike planet in that direction. What the bleep do you think you're doing?

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Repeating. Peerssa for the State, Peerssa—"

Corbett tried to switch it off. The teaching chair hadn't told him about an off switch. He managed to disconnect a wire. Somewhat later, he located the lunar base with his signal laser and began transmission.

"This is Corbett for himself, Corbett for himself. I'm getting sick and tired of having to find you every damn time I want to say something. So I'll give you this all at once.

"I'm not going to any of the stars on your list.

"It's occurred to me that the relativity equations work better for me the faster I go. If I stop every fifteen light-years to launch a probe, the way you want me to, I could spend two hundred years at it and never get anywhere. Whereas if I just aim the ship in one direction and keep going, I can build up a ferocious Tau factor.

"It works out that I can reach the galactic hub in twenty-one years, ship's time, if I hold myself down to one gravity acceleration. And, Pierce, I just can't resist the idea. You were the one who called me a born tourist, remember? Well, the stars in the galactic hub aren't like the stars in the arms. And they're packed a quarter to a half light-year apart, according to your own theories. It must be passing strange in there. I can't resist it.

"So I'll go exploring on my own. Maybe I'll find some of your reducing atmosphere planets and drop the probes there. Maybe I won't. I'll see you in about seventy thousand years, your time. By then your precious State may have withered away. Or you'll have colonies on the seeded planets and some of them may have broken loose from you. I'll join one of them. Or—"

Corbett thought it through, rubbing the straight, sharp line of his nose. "I'll have to check it out on the computer," he said. "But if I don't like any of your worlds when I get back, there are always the Clouds of Magellan. I'll bet they aren't more than twenty-five years away, ship's time." ★

Starting in the next issue of GALAXY—

DARK INFERNO

James White's new novel

. . . men and women forced to survive in the realm of purest physics . . .

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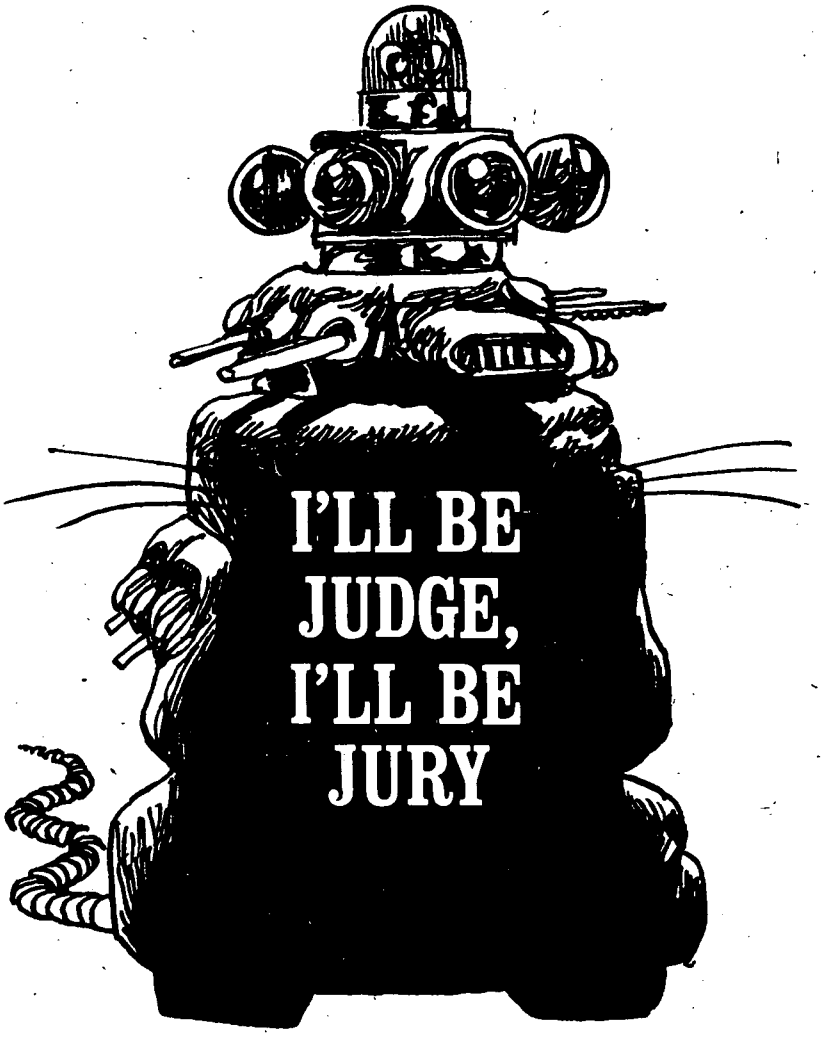

JOHN TAYLOR

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THE on-duty police force of Chicago Conurb SSE (Indiana) was at his console. Ghost streets flickered on the monitors from the mobile units, rinsing him in light, but he was alone, seeing, unseen. There was no sound except a muted, air-conditioned sigh.

Before Braun were twelve small screens, a large screen, a pair of waldo inputs and a GO-NO GO override.

"Query," said the computer. "Unit Five." The Unit 5 pickup expanded on the large screen. "Group over three, classifiable as unlawful assembly under local ordinance. Decision?"

"Move pickup in," said Braun and three middle-aged men came on the screen, squinting impassively into the spot over the pickup lens.

"Two Caucasoid, one Negroid," said the computer. "Decision?"

They looked all right and wore business suits. "Standard statement of apology. Continue Unit Five on program." The three men vanished and Braun looked back up to the row of monitors. Still three hours and twenty-eight minutes of his four-hour shift to go.

It was hard to remember what a mobile unit looked like to civilians—the shifting lights and curves of the dark-blue carapace, the sensor-manipulator head on its extensible neck, the flattened weapons turret. People called them "blue beetles" or sometimes "bluebottles" and wrote letters to the editor about bringing back the cop on the beat.

Braun had scarcely seen the exterior of the mobile unit since training. Except in moments of leisure or disorientation, no man really looks at his own hand and most of the time he saw a mobile unit only when one showed up on another's pickup.

The relationship between man, computer and mobile unit could be confusing—the officer who had had to be hospitalized because he thought he had projected his soul into a mobile unit was still departmental legend. Braun had never felt any such danger, probably because the computer's voice was not his own. He knew that he was shut inside the computer like a conscience in the brain and that the mobile units were far away, moving according to the computer's commands—except in situations out of the ordinary, when he would earn his pay.

"Query. Anomaly. Unit Twelve." A young woman in the last months of pregnancy appeared on the large screen. She was blond and drained of color in the glare. "Woman alone on the streets."

"Switch me in."

"Affirmative."

"Ma'm?"

She stared at the voice. "Yes?"

"Anything wrong?"

"No," she said. Her voice was

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small and cool. "I just had to get some cigarettes."

"May I have your citizen number and address?"

"My name—" she pronounced the words with care— "is Mary Cecile O'Hara; my citizen number is—" she gave it and also her address. Before she had finished, a display in red flashed in the corner of the screen: there was a map pinpointing her as only two hundred feet from Block 31 Hoosier Towers, the address she had given, and below: CITIZEN NUMBER CONFIRMED, ADDRESS UNCONFIRMED.

"Have you moved recently?"

"Oh, yes. We just moved in yesterday."

"Would you like a mobile unit to escort you back to your door?"

"That would be nice," said Mary Cecile O'Hara.

EMERGENCY—EMERGENCY—EMERGENCY.

"I must sign off," said Braun. "The mobile unit will put me in contact if necessary—" and another pickup was on the screen.

"Unit Eight. Under sniper fire. Armor-piercing. No damage."

"Source?"

"Roof Longhouse Forty-five-Red, J.T. McCutcheon Development. IR scanner localization confirmed by ballistic analysis."

INCOMING, flashed the screen. "Incoming. No damage," said the voice. "Same localization. Reply?"

"Affirmative."

"Stoner or grenade?"

"Grenade."

"Hypnotic or concussion?"

"Hypnotic. Bracket of three. Call in Hovering Squad. Alert fixed scanners."

"Launched. Third shot incoming. No damage."

BRAUN could imagine. But could the snipers? Borosilicates and pure iron filaments, electronic reflexes, sensors that from a hundred yards away could take the temperature of a moth or tell if a lock's tumblers moved—these were still beyond ordinary expectation. All spinoff from the defunct space program and Southeast Asia. Braun remembered a man who had tried to claw open the maintenance bay of a unit barehanded.

"Estimate?"

"No further fire. Situation under control. Hovering Squad dispatched and homing."

"Return Unit Eight to program at discretion." In the month after the introduction of police hypnotics, friends or accomplices had attempted to rescue unconscious suspects. But then the knowledge that the sleep of the gassed could slide into fatal coma without the antidote became widespread. Now the victims were left to the comparative mercy of the police interns hovering above the roof-tops.

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"Query. Unit Three. Youth stopped. Over eighteen and not subject to curfew, but under twenty-one. Marijuana stop and frisk?"

"Affirmative. Standard apology if indicated."

The night ground on. In a free moment Braun punched for a tube of coffee, though he knew he'd pay for it in sleep later, and glanced around the cubicle. It was surprising how impersonal it still was. The only thing of his was the brass paperweight holding down the printouts, with the inscription from President Truman: THE BUCK STOPS HERE—but one of the day men had taped up a yellowing comic strip laminated in plastic in which a creature named B.O. Plenty made obser-

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★★★ GALAXY STARS ★★★

Stephen Tall is not really Stephen Tall at all. He is, in fact, Professor of Biology at an East Coast college, and he keeps his real identity a closely guarded secret. Occasionally our professor brings science fiction into the classroom as illustrative reading material. And his students have not as yet guessed that their teacher is also a highly regarded yarn spinner in s-f circles.

Tall tales have been appearing in the magazines since 1955 when *GALAXY* published "The Lights on Precipice Peak"—later adapted for the radio program *X-1*—a series whose scripts came from the pages of *GALAXY*. Serving on several college councils, in addition to fulfilling his regular teaching assignments, has not left Tall with much time to write over the last twenty years. But now that he has an agent who is always badgering him to keep up with the growing s-f market, his fiction output has been increasing. At present Tall is at work on his first novel. He reports that it will be one of his *Stardust* series—the series to which his story in this issue belongs. Incidentally, Dr. Kissinger and his navigator Moe Cheng have been cruising the galaxies together for years. Was this, perhaps, prognostication?

Tall denies it. He writes us that he "couldn't run the *Stardust* without Roscoe Kissinger. He's my narrator in four stories and in the novel now two-thirds written. Dr. Henry K. is a Johnny-come-lately, and no relation to Roscoe at all. Just as Chou En-Lai has nothing in common with Moe Cheng except a thick upper eyelid. Without Cheng to navigate, Cap'n Jules Griffin could not implement Ultraspan. I hope nobody named Rasmussen becomes conspicuous in world doings. Then we might indeed have to close up shop."

Tall's specialties include field sciences and ecology—and he is known both as an ornithologist and an entomologist. He has recently returned from a research jaunt to the Rockies where he studied the ecosystems above timberline.

"Now that 'ecology' has become a word everybody knows, readers are beginning to look for it in their science fiction," says Tall. And we look forward to more s-f from our ecology-minded professor. We also look forward to more ecology from our s-f-minded professor. In and out of his stories. What the world needs now, say we, is not only love—but ecological research and awareness. And the troops are led by such as Stephen Tall.

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vations on the Supreme Court; and Smith had actually hung his degree from MIT and his IBM certificate on the bulkhead as if they made him different.

And there was no mirror. When Smith had put one up they made him take it down—the designers said mirrors were "distracting."

"Query. Unit Six. Verse propaganda found in Roger D. Branigin Mall."

"Subject?"

"Law and law enforcement."

"Pickup."

A flickering sheet appeared, too dim to read. "Focus." The suction fingers on the pickup head spread it flat, the xerographed letters jumped out at him.

Superimposed upon a crude cartoon of a turn-of-the-century policeman was a poem curling down the page like a river or a snake or the hairless tail of some rodent:

Fury said to
a mouse, That
he met in the house,

it began and he read down its twisting, diminishing length to the end.

"Quite clever and indirect," he said. "What's the author's name? I can't quite see it."

"Lewis Carroll."

"Any listing?"

"No listing."

"Not even a pedestrian ticket?"

"No listing."

"Credit transactions, tax records, social security?"

"No listing."

"Query on-line data banks nationally."

"Record: Lewis Carroll a pseudonym."

"Author's real name?"

"Charles L. Dodgson."

"Occupation?"

"Mathematician."

"Where employed?"

"No data."

"Doesn't he eat?"

"No. Charles L. Dodgson died eighteen-ninety-eight."

Even though no one was watching, not even the machine, Braun's face burned as if the skin had been peeled away. He read down to the end again:

I'll be
judge,
I'll be jury,
said
cun-
ning
old
Fury:
I'll
try
the
whole
cause
and
con-
demn
you to
death. ★

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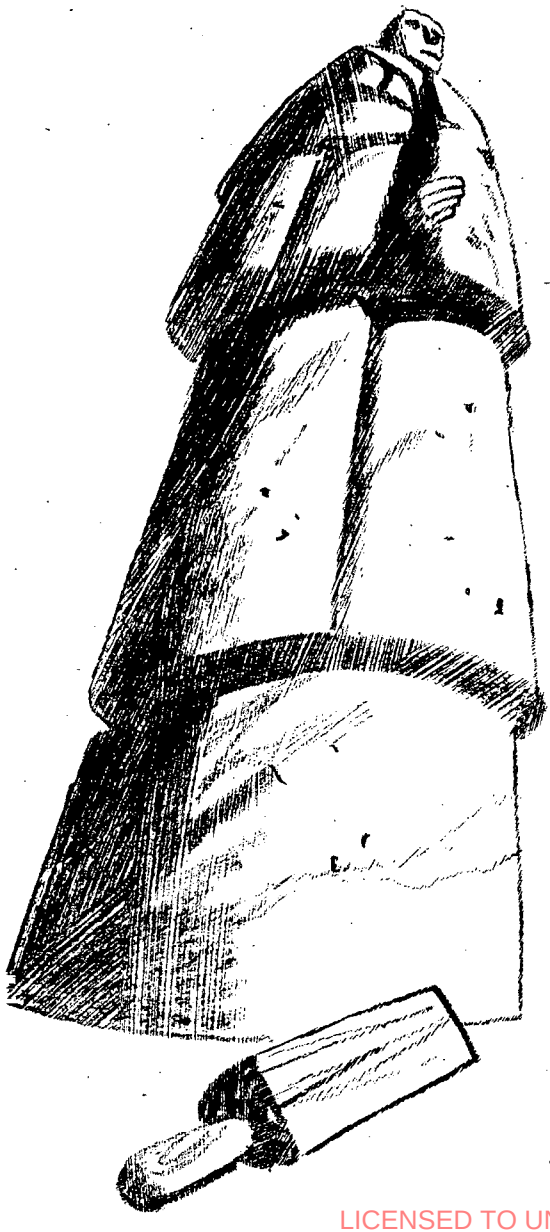

Every paradise has a Messiah, every human frontier—a man!

STARCULT

EILEEN KERNAGHAN

I

THERE is no lovelier planet anywhere than Terra Nova and no pageant more splendid than the Festival at Perigord. The procession will be fine this year—I think I should like to see it.

There will be banners and bugles, the proud young men in jackets of scarlet and gold and purple,

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girls dancing in diaphanous robes with flowers in their hair. And trailing along behind will come the pilgrims, a drab lot as a rule, draggled about the hems, but very solemn and earnest.

They will wind through the streets of the town with a joyful noise of bells and drums and tambourines to the top of the windy hill that overlooks the harbor—and they will come down at last to Thomas Howard Square, where the many-faceted spire of the Thomas Howard Monument catches the sunlight and shatters it into countless glittering fragments.

There will be speeches then, and paeans and hosannas. And the faces of the celebrants will—for a while—be sober, as they worship at the shrine of the Martyr Saint of Perigord.

The incense at the altar will mingle with the heavy fragrance of flowering trees and with the faint sea-haze blown up from the harbor. The air of Terra Nova goes to the head like strong wine—though there will be plenty of that too for those who need it.

Through the long afternoon there will be singing and dancing and the music of tabor and trumpet and psaltery will float on the warm air. At night, in the great mirrored hall of the Temple of the True Followers, the lamps will burn until dawn.

I have heard that people come to Perigord from three galaxies in search of sensual delight and spiritual exaltation. My memories of earlier years give me reason to doubt it. And the Festival this year will outshine all previous ones, for this is the fiftieth anniversary of the day Thomas Howard, founder of the Faith, Father of all True Followers, went forth and sacrificed himself to save the human race.

I'm an old woman now and it's nearly fifty years since I left Perigord. I don't suppose I'll ever go back—least of all on Festival Day. I think that I might climb up on the platform with the speakers, wave my arms for silence and scream into the faces of the crowd, *Lies, lies! All this is lies!*

And the faces would gaze at me with malice or pity and incomprehension and I would be shut away, without comment, in a home for the demented old.

But I should like, all the same, to exorcise this demon that has lived with me for half a century and so I am going to add to the record my story of Thomas Howard—not Howard the Martyr Saint; there are already too many books on that subject—but of a man named Thomas Howard whom I knew a long time ago.

I WAS nineteen years old, a student and still in that state of pleasant insanity that sees the whole universe as a ripe plum. It

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was a wonderful age in which to be young. Star drive was less than half a century old. Earth was still drunk with dreams of empire. For me and for the human race all things were possible.

I remember that I was taking Comparative Extra-Terrestrial Religion or Martian Epic Poetry or some other such frivolous liberal arts course. Thomas Howard was in my class. He sat in the seat next to mine—otherwise I might never have noticed him.

He was not in the least good-looking. He had a large square head surmounted by a bristly crop of sand-colored hair. His skin was doughy and pale, as though he ate badly and never went outdoors. But he turned once and stared at me and I saw his eyes. They were deep-set, a cold silver-gray, the color of a starship's hull and ringed with shadow. Unaccountably, they frightened me.

He was older by five or six years than the usual sophomore. I gathered that he was something of a professional student. I saw him often at refreshments between classes and once or twice he bought me something. He seemed interested in me in an odd sort of way, but he made me uncomfortable. Under the gaze of those strange pale eyes I felt far too much like a laboratory specimen impaled on a pin. There was no warmth in his face, only a sort of mocking amusement, a cynical appreciation of human absurdity. What went on in the mind behind that facade was impossible to guess.

I thought of him as solitary, remote, detached from ordinary human relationships—which I suppose is why it was a shock for me to meet Jocelyn. She was sitting with him one day in the servomat—a big voluptuous, rather stupid-looking blond girl. I had come in with a classmate named Bill Ferguson, and Thomas Howard beckoned us over. He motioned vaguely across the table with his spoon.

"Jocelyn," he said. If she had a last name he didn't bother to mention it.

"We've met," Bill said.

I glanced at her with curiosity. She had beautiful nordic features and large eyes that gazed on Howard with devotion. I don't remember her saying anything and after this cursory introduction Howard ignored her.

When they left I said to Bill, "Who's Jocelyn?"

Bill looked embarrassed. "When I knew her in her pre-Howard days she was nice—a well-brought-up small-town girl. She used to belong to the Ecumenical Fellowship, sing in the choir—the whole bit. But our friend Howard seems to have taken her over body and soul."

I raised my eyebrows.

"If you're going to ask is she

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living with him—the answer is yes." He grunted. "Whatever that guy has, he should bottle it."

What Howard had was not, I discovered, lightly to be dismissed.

I belonged to a lot of campus clubs in those days and one of my favorite spots for idling away a lunch hour was the Galactic Affairs Society clubroom. GAS was one of those quasi-political campus discussion groups with a membership that covered the ideological spectrum—everything from fuzzy neo-socialists to Galactic Federalists to colonial types weighed down by the Earthman's Burden. I think most of us were there because the seats were upholstered and there was a refreshment bar next door.

I wandered in one day and spotted Thomas Howard sitting alone at the back of the room, aloof as always and faintly amused. He had never mentioned his politics to me. I wondered where he would fit in.

The meeting rapidly bogged down in one of our interminably pointless arguments—this time I think it was a question of buying or not buying green baize to recover the conference table. A sense of futility settled like a miasma over the room. The chairman had begun to stare fixedly at the clock. It occurred to me, sleepily, that most of our meetings were like this.

Then Thomas Howard rose to his feet.

"Fools," he said and the word brought me with a jolt out of a halfdoze. Everyone in the room turned around to stare at him.

"I have listened long enough," he said, "to this puerile squabbling. Earth is rotten with corruption and the disease is spreading—we are contaminating the stars. And you—the new generation. While humanity cries out for a strong fresh wind to blow away the accumulated filth of ages, to sweep the galaxy clean—what do you do?" The words fairly dripped with ridicule and contempt. "You sit in this stuffy little room and wrangle over what? The color of a tablecloth!"

At first I thought, *This is a joke, an elaborate put-on* . . . But Howard was scarcely the type for undergraduate humor, which left only one other possible conjecture—the man was a lunatic.

At any rate, he had our full attention. The chairman had gone quite rigid with astonishment or indignation or both.

Thomas Howard warmed to his subject. He had a remarkable voice, rich, deep-timbered, powerful—an actor's voice or an orator's. It was—or so I thought at the time—his greatest asset. He had learned to use it as one plays a fine instrument. One moment it was comanding, the next insinuating. Now it was gentle and soothing, now a thunderous roar.

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"You call yourselves the Galactic Affairs Society. Isn't it time you looked at the real questions that face the human race? Some of you are expansionists, some federalists. But the true choice, the one you have chosen to ignore, is not whether to stretch out our greedy hands to foul more systems or whether to sit here and enjoy our prosperity like so many hogs before a full trough. No. We must decide—and decide quickly—between decadence and spiritual purity, between the stench of moral decay and the clean wind of ascetism. We must cleanse and purify our society of greed and gluttony and corruption. Then, and only then, will we be fit to expand to other systems and be welcome wherever we go."

The voice and the eyes—those icy, compelling gray eyes—somehow broke down the barriers of the mind, shattering skepticism, persuading, dominating, demanding. I can't explain it. I have never been able to explain it even to myself—and least of all to those who have never heard Thomas Howard speak. But he talked to a roomful of people who a few minutes earlier had been bored, restless and irritated. And what we heard was not the preposterous, melodramatic speech but the savage intensity of conviction that burned behind it.

Out of that meeting was born the Universal Purification Party. The Galactic Affairs Society became the vanguard of a campus movement that six months later controlled the Student Council.

As for myself, I switched my allegiance to the Campus Catch and Madrigal Society. Even then, with all my illusions still intact, I had little taste for reforming humanity and a growing suspicion of Thomas Howard.

I SAW him infrequently after that, more often on tri-di posters than in the flesh. There was a vacancy on council. He won the seat and the Purification Party embarked on an aggressive—and well-financed—campaign to sweep the end-of-term elections. I noticed that Howard was cutting classes more often than not.

I ran across him one evening, though, sitting alone with Jocelyn in the deserted library. Both of them were dressed in the long gray robes of the Purification Party. On smaller girls it was a dowdy, shapeless garment but it suited Jocelyn. It gave her the majestic look of one of the heroines of Earth's idealized past.

That unexpected meeting gave me an ideal chance to ask a question that had been bothering me for months. I went over and sat down. My question was not the sort that lent itself to tact and diplomacy—I decided on a frontal attack.

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"Thomas," I said. "What are you up to?"

He had a trick of raising one eyebrow in sardonic enquiry. "Up to? My dear Anna!"

"Tell it to me simply. What's the point of all this purification business?"

"You haven't been reading my pamphlets. Or listening to my speeches."

"Rot. You're not interested in cleansing and purifying society. You're careful not to talk about your private life, but I have friends who tell me things." I noticed that Jocelyn was looking uncomfortable. I steeled myself. This was no time for delicacy.

"All right," he said. "I'll tell you the truth—but you won't like it. I want power. A great deal of power. And I have the means of getting it. This campus is just the beginning, a testing ground. You might call it a lab experiment."

"You're going to take over the galaxy?" I suppose I must have sounded amused.

"Not just the galaxy, Anna. Some day the name of Thomas Howard will be known beyond it—wherever men's minds reach. Minds are what I want, Anna—yours, everyone's."

His eyes probed mine, reached past them and suddenly I was furious. I had not invited the intrusion.

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. Here you are, a perpetual student in a third-rate university and you're going to take over the galaxy. You haven't even got a degree. In fact you barely passed your mid-terms." I glared at him. "You must think you're awfully good at something!"

He spoke quietly. "I am good at something, Anna. I understand people. And I can make them do what I want."

"You think so because you've manipulated a lot of political malcontents?"

"Jocelyn. Tell Anna what we live on, you and I."

Jocelyn's eyes widened and her jaw dropped. She looked as though she had been kicked unexpectedly in the midriff. "Thomas?"

"Tell Anna where we get our money."

She stared at him.

Finally she whispered, "I—I work."

Her face had turned beet red.

"What do you work at, Jocelyn?" His voice was gentle and insistent.

She turned her head away. "I go with men. For money."

Thomas Howard smiled. He was satisfied. "You see, Anna, I can make anyone do anything." His cold gray eyes stared into mine. "Even you, Anna."

I rose without speaking and walked out of the library. I hoped that I would never meet Thomas

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Howard again for as long as I lived.

II

I LEFT campus at the end of that term and went on to technical school. A year or so later I began to see Howard's name in the newspapers. He had moved on to larger campuses and his ripples were widening rapidly. Then I headed for the outworlds with my brand-new communications papers—and when next I returned to Earth, Thomas Howard had dropped out of sight.

Which brings me to the day that I discovered Perigord. The name gave me a mild shock as I read through the *Job Opportunities—Outplanets* column. Coming across it in that dreary succession of Jones Landings and West Newtons and New Londons was like finding a jewel in a bucket of nuts and bolts. I read the ad. Perigord was the only town on Terra Nova, an Earthlike, English-speaking planet well out on the rim of the galaxy. Logic told me that I would find yet another grubby, dusty little mining town, but to my irrational feminine imagination the name conjured up visions of roses and troubadours and sunlit history-book castles. And so I came to Perigord—in search of what? I suppose it must have been romance.

Some nostalgic French expatriate must have gazed upon that vivid green and blue and ochre landscape and the great plateaus and towers of rock rising up behind the town and given Perigord its name.

The impression you have, as you approach the town from a distance, is that some careless hand has scattered heaps and mounds of rainbow-colored jewels in the middle of a high meadow. The mountains lie behind and the sea below—and as you come closer you can see the little boats with brightly colored sails far out in the harbor mouth.

When you go through the streets of Perigord on a clear day you walk with your eyes squinted against the dazzle. The walls of the houses are green and amber and blue and scarlet in every shade imaginable and they flash and glitter like gems in the sunshine.

Most structures on the planet are built from a native mineral quarried in the hills; on Earth we called it star-crystal. Immensely durable, it splits conveniently into blocks and can be polished to a diamond-like brilliance. Those strange and beautiful rock formations behind Perigord, the many-colored spires and pinnacles and high flat mesas, are star-crystal deposits; they have endured through the centuries while the elements wore down the softer rock around them.

You still see a few private

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estates on Earth that are built, at least in part, of star-crystal. At one time Terra Nova exported it in great quantities, but it was always expensive to ship and has long since gone out of fashion.

There was someone to meet me at the shuttlecraft—a darkly saturnine individual with an astonishing pair of moustaches. His name was Jean-Pierre Jackson and he was director of Terra Nova's communications system. He told me to call him Pete.

We rode into town in an asthmatic aircar that I suspect arrived with the original settlers. En route I learned that my duties would be light and pleasant, that Perigord was the beauty spot of the rim worlds and would some day rival Betelgeuse II and Benson's Planet as a tourist attraction, and that I could lodge comfortably and conveniently in Perigord's best (and only) inn, right next door to the Communications Center. The versatile Mr. Jackson was also, as it turned out, the innkeeper.

The Perigord Inn was straight out of a fairytale, a sort of overgrown cottage of dark rose-colored star-crystal, with old-fashioned wooden shutters and an intricately carved front door. On either side of the steps were two small trees that were almost—but not quite—French lilacs. Their branches dripped with heavy snow-white blooms.

"Lunchtime," Pete Jackson observed. "Damn, I'm supposed to be at a meeting. Go in—the wife will take care of you."

The aircar departed, wheezing heavily. My landlord seemed to be a man of many pressing affairs. I opened the door and was swept inside on a tidal wave of hospitality. Nancy Jackson was a big woman, generous of hip and bust and spirit. I liked her immediately, though she left me a little breathless. I lunched on the vaguely troutlike fish that abounds in the Sea of Perigord and I drank excellent local wine. Nancy talked while I ate. She was an inexhaustible spring of local gossip, historical data and sociological observation. Both she and her husband had been born on the planet, children of the earliest settlers. Pete was an organizer, a joiner—he had made his inn the hub around which the rest of Perigord revolved. Nancy was a talker but she was a listener, too. If anything happened in Perigord, Nancy knew about it.

PRESENTLY my host returned, inquired after my comfort and well-being and took me next door to see the radio shack, a structure almost as gorgeous as the inn, in infinitely varying purple hues. It took him only a few minutes to show me my duties—I could see that I was going to have plenty of leisure time. At one time Perigord had been a busy

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port, shuttlecraft coming and going around the clock with cargoes of star-crystal for the big freighters hanging in orbit. I could tell by the size of the radio shack that once there had been a substantial staff. Now I was alone, with little to occupy me. The freighters came infrequently and their visits were brief.

Pete Jackson rushed off again, apparently in several directions. I locked up the radio shack with the key he had given me and set my wrist alarm in the improbable event that I was needed. Then I went out to explore this treasure of a world that I had blundered upon.

The air was soft and full of the scent of blossoms. It was always like that on Terra Nova, all year round. To someone raised as I was in the north-temperate latitudes of Earth, it was like living perpetually in the second week of May.

Nancy had given me a rough idea of the local geography. High up in the shadow of the hills were the great villas; whatever wealth remained on Terra Nova was concentrated there. Most of the owners were retired people—executives of the extractive industries and the starship lines, who had visited the planet once or twice on business and loved it enough to return for good.

Down by the waterfront, at the other extreme, was an artists' colony and in between were the tidy tree-lined avenues where the rest of the populace lived—quarry workers, fishermen, shopkeepers and the like.

After a while I wandered down to the wharf and sat with my toes in the water, watching the fishermen. One of them was doing something complicated with a net. When he looked up and saw me he gave me a friendly wave and climbed up onto the wharf.

"Hello," he said. "I'm Jock McLaren. And you, if I'm not mistaken, will be our new radio operator."

"Word gets around quickly," I said. "I've only just come off the boat."

"It's a small planet. Anybody new in town is big news. Especially if she's female. Are you from Earth?"

"Originally. I've wandered about a good bit since I left tech school."

"Can't be all that long—since your schooldays, I mean."

I smiled, pleased at the compliment. "Six years. And a lot of different planets—you'd be surprised."

"I'm astonished."

I glanced at him with curiosity. He looked like anyone's idea of a seafaring man—tall, tanned, forty-ish, broad-shouldered and still lean about the middle—but somehow he didn't sound like a fisherman.

He asked me, "What brought you to Perigord?"

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"The name," I said. "It sounded intriguing. The last place I worked was called Dry Lake, on Smith's Planet. I was driven out after six months by dust and acute boredom. And what about you?" I asked him. "What brought you to Perigord?"

"Same reason. I liked the name." He grinned at me. He had a nice grin, open and cheerful and unassuming. He seemed a person who felt comfortable with himself.

He stood up. "I'd better get going. Maybe I'll see you up at the shack. I help out sometimes when things get busy."

I WATCHED his boat, the *Sophia Prunikos*, until she was out of sight around the curve of the bay. Then I wandered back up the slope to the Perigord Inn, through a late afternoon as mellow and golden as Shal'larakh wine.

At dinner I said to Nancy, "I met an odd sort of fisherman today. Jock McSomething. Do you know him?"

"Oh, have you met Jock already? He'll like you. He must find the local girls a bit dull."

I seized the chance to pump her for information. "He hasn't always been a fisherman, has he?"

"Good heavens, no." The idea seemed to amuse her. "You really don't know who he is, then? No, of course you wouldn't. And knowing Jock, he'd hardly be likely to tell you. Suppose I called him Captain McLaren? Would that ring a bell?"

I searched my memory. "The skipper of *Venture II*? Come on, Nancy, you're joking."

She shook her head. "Jock McLaren was a famous man in his time. How many planets was it that *Venture* claimed for Earth? Dozens and dozens, anyway."

"What's he doing on Perigord as a fisherman?"

"Oh, he's been retired for years. They pension off starship captains before they're forty. It's a rough life. Anyway, he lost an eye on his last new planet. As for being a fisherman, he's perfectly happy at it. I'm sure he'd had all the fame and publicity he's ever likely to want."

She laughed at my expression, which must have been a mixture of incredulity and awe. "You didn't expect to meet a celebrity down there on the wharf, did you? Oh, I tell you, Anna, Perigord's a curious place. And getting curiouser every day."

Jock McLaren came around to the inn next day to ask if I would like to go fishing. It was to be a pleasure trip—he left his nets and heavy tackle stowed away and dug out a couple of light rods.

"Jock," I said as the afternoon wore on and I felt I knew him better, "don't you miss space?"

"Not so much. I like this life." He gestured out over the silent emptiness of the Sea of Perigord.

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"This is really what I was looking for when I went into space. Solitude, my own vessel, everything open and uncluttered—and quiet."

"Was space like that?"

"Sometimes. At first it was. But after a while they expected me to act like a public figure—some sort of celebrity. I've got no talent for that kind of thing."

I nodded, remembering what Nancy had told me.

He added, "When they retired me from active duty they wanted me to sit behind a desk. But I like this better."

The sun was warm on our backs. A light breeze ruffled the water and stirred the trees along the shoreline. Those strange, carved, many-colored hills were outlined against a flawless sky. I had no trouble understanding his choice.

Jock's line went taut and he reeled in a vicious-looking creature that bore some perverted resemblance to a fish. I hoped I would not be expected to have it for dinner.

I remembered something else I had wanted to ask.

"Nancy told me that Perigord was a curious place. Any idea what she meant?"

He grinned. "I can guess. She wasted no time telling you all about my past, but I'll bet she didn't tell you about the Temple and the True Followers."

"The what?"

"Did you happen to notice that big building up on the hill near the high-rent district?"

"The sort of Purple Parthenon one? I could hardly miss it."

"That's the Temple. It used to be a theater, when the town was booming. But lately it's been taken over by a bunch of religious nuts."

"Why would Nancy keep quiet about a thing like that?"

"When they first moved in our Nancy went up to take a look. She hates like hell to miss anything. Apparently she got interested enough to sign on as a member. Then she found out what was actually going on up there and she came tearing home like a scorched cat. Poor old Pete was scandalized—basically, he's pretty much a puritan. Since then he's done his damnedest to find an excuse to close down the place. Which ought to be easy enough, since he's the licensing inspector. But the Prophet is crafty—Pete has yet to catch him breaking a civic ordinance."

"What exactly *is* going on?"

He gave me a look of seraphic innocence.

"Ask Nancy," he said.

And so I asked Nancy. I hadn't thought her capable of so much indignation.

"The *Temple*?" she said and looked as though she had swallowed something unpleasant. She added ominously, "If you've half

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the sense I think you have you'll never put your nose near the place. The True Followers are the sort a decent girl shouldn't even know about."

Poor Nancy. If she had told me that the pews were hard or the services long-winded—if she had said that the True Followers were excessively puritanical or merely dull—I might have stayed away.

THE TEMPLE of the True Followers was purple and majestic. Its glittering facade was shaded delicately from palest lavender to a deep and glowing violet. The architecture was a style I had come to recognize as Perigordian Civic—solid, squarish and exuberantly colorful. It was surrounded by a sort of terrace with walks and benches and the customary display of fountains, stylized lamp standards and shrubbery. The front entrance was flanked by a brace of muses—or possibly they were graces—who inspected me coldly out of sculptured eyes. Something was quite odd about their expressions—it bothered me but I could not name what it was.

A discreet notice to one side of the entrance said, Public Service, Day 10, 8th hr. I glanced at my watch—the hour was 7:85. I sat down on a bench to wait. By seven ninety-five clusters of people were standing patiently outside the entrance. Only a few were young, I noticed. Most were well-dressed, carefully coiffed matrons. Promptly at eight hours the doors swung open. There was no anteroom. We stepped directly into an enormous, high-ceilinged hall.

The place was not at all what I had expected from my limited experience of temples. It was more like a very elaborate set designed for a tri-di historical.

Massive beams arched across the high theater ceiling. They looked impressively old, as though they had in fact been blackened by the hearth fires of centuries. At one end of the hall was the stage, which now served as a kind of dais, with heavy velvet drapes and a cushioned, canopied throne. At the other end was an enormous stone fireplace.

The walls on three sides were hung with tapestried forests where stags and hounds, yeoman and unicorns pranced and cavorted. The fourth wall, illogically I thought, was mirrored from floor to ceiling. It caught and reflected the polychromatic light that slanted from above. I looked up and saw that high clerestory windows filled with translucent bricks of star-crystal had been cut into the theater walls.

The theater seats were gone; around the margins of the hall, instead, were settles, intricately decorated, with wide seats and solid legs. They must have been reproductions but they were good

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ones. The dark wood looked hand-carved and had the mellow glow of antiquity. They were piled high with silk and velvet cushions in rich colors—crimson and old gold, amethyst and lapis lazuli.

The floor, what I could see of it, was paved with star-crystal and scattered everywhere were deep-piled rugs and animal skins, singly and in opulent heaps.

The hall was starting to fill. A group of musicians came in through a rear door and stood on the dais. They were dressed in tunics and tights, in the clear cool colors of old enamels—greens and torquois and cobalt blue, with here and there a streak of gold or scarlet. They began to play something medieval and processional, full of trumpets and percussion. A deep hush fell over the congregation. Slowly and with great dignity a solitary figure moved out onto the dias.

WHEN I saw his face I must have gasped aloud, for I remember that the dowager on the next seat turned around to stare at me. The jaw was heavier and the hair thinner. The dull gray garment of the purification party was gone and in its place was a spectacular gold-embroidered crimson robe. But I recognized at once the fleshy lips, the unhealthy pallor of the skin and those cold, compelling gray eyes.

I knew then that Nancy had been right. This was the moment for me to escape as she had escaped back to the safety of the Perigord Inn. But something—curiosity or surprise or fascination—held me to my seat and I listened.

Thomas Howard was a man well into his thirties now. His voice had lost none of its richness and resonance. Maturity, I thought, had given him polish and subtlety—but more than that, it had intensified the power of his will, the furious strength of conviction that flowed from him like a palpable force. I told myself that it was an illusion, some sort of stage trick that he had developed and perfected over the years. I had not forgotten the look on the face of poor Jocelyn, that day in the library. I knew that the man was cold-blooded, amoral, a charlatan and quite possibly a dangerous and naive psychotic.

And yet as I sat there I was caught up—involuntarily—in a kind of hypnosis that gripped us all.

What was it he said. It's hard after so many years to remember.

"The perfect knowledge," he began, "the ultimate freedom of the spirit, is this; that we are unafraid to stray into those actions whose very names are unmentionable. For when the spirit is committed to the realm of the transmundane deity it is indifferent to the natural world. And how shall our souls transcend the corruption of the

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body? It is written that we must render the flesh to the flesh and the spirit to the spirit. We must render to nature its own, for thereby we shall exhaust its powers. When we have made all experience ours, when we have performed all actions and looked unabashed on all forbidden things, then shall we have paid our debt and our souls shall find release.

"For you who are the True Followers there can be no corruption. For as gold sunk in filth will not lose its beauty but will preserve its own nature, so nothing can change our spiritual essence."

I lost the thread of his argument as he wandered through a bewildering maze of dogma and symbolism, full of references to transmigration and the acosmic self, the Seven Spheres and the Poimandres of Hermes Trismegistus.

Now, as I write them down, his words seem tenuous and obscure. But when one heard him speak one soon stopped listening to the words. One was aware only of that sonorous, vibrant voice of his—a voice like honey and cello strings and thunder—that rolled out over the hall in great engulfing waves. For a few bewildering moments the minds, the thoughts of the crowd—of the placid matrons in their farrlgo furs and zoid-jewels, of the scattering of cynical young people from the artists' colony—were drawn together and coalesced. I was caught up in it too. I could not help myself, none of us could. We were no longer individuals. We were a mindless extension of Thomas Howard's will.

"DON'T go yet, Anna—it's been a long time." He caught my hand as I filed out with the others past the big carved doors. I was surprised and in spite of myself a little flattered that he remembered me.

"You will stay and have a word with me, won't you? It's not often an old friend from Earth turns up in my congregation." His manner had changed. There was still that air of proud self-sufficiency, but he seemed less arrogant, less coldly cynical then I remembered, more like the conventional clergyman greeting his flock. But then he gave me that small, half-amused, half-mocking smile and I sensed that behind the veneer he had not changed at all.

My instincts told me to jerk my hand free, to tear my gaze away from his, to turn and run. But it seemed an uncivilized way to behave. And so I nodded mutely and when he said, "Come into my office, where we can talk—" I followed him.

We stepped abruptly out of the twelfth century into the twenty-second. His office was, quite unexpectedly, severe and businesslike. No carvings here, or enameled inlays, but plain para-

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wood paneling, a large square desk, some modern chairs, a small computer and a microfilm cabinet.

He drew up a chair for me—a gesture that belonged to the new Thomas Howard. "Now, my dear Anna, what have you been doing for eight years?"

I told him briefly and then said, "What made you change your approach?"

At twenty-seven I was still an abrupt and tactless creature. Especially with people I disliked.

The single eyebrow rose in mock surprise. "I beg your pardon?"

"I mean you were having such a whale of a good time taking over student governments. After you got tired of our campus—how many others did you infiltrate? About half a dozen, wasn't it? And always a bigger one."

He smiled. "Quite right. Just before I left Earth I had a nice toehold on the London School of Economics."

"Why did you leave?"

"The usual story—the government stepped in. I make governments nervous. The problem has always been to keep them from getting nervous before I'm ready to take over. They see an organization like the ones I've created—strongly motivated, cohesive, single-minded—and they know what's going to happen to their own shaky administrations."

"So they drive you out."

"Exactly. Seems unfair, doesn't it?"

"And now you're trying to sneak back from a different direction."

"Very intelligent of you, Anna."

"Do you think this time it will work?"

"I'm positive it will. It's more than just a matter of a different approach, a diversionary tactic. Over the last eight years I've begun to realize what sort of power I possess and how to use it. I could always influence people—now I've learned to control them absolutely."

I said, "You're like the old rabble-rousers—Hitler and Stalin and the rest."

"Perhaps. But they ultimately failed. I'm not going to fail. And I don't think they fully realized what power they had—or possibly they had it in a lesser degree."

"Why should you tell me all this? Aren't you afraid I'll go to the authorities?"

He laughed. "Go ahead. They can't stop me. No one can stop me now." He took me by the arm, led me back out into the great hall. "Look at this. It cost a great deal of money. Where do you suppose I got it?"

"From your congregation? They looked pretty well-off, I thought."

"Indeed they are. Those women are wives of retired spaceline executives, heads of industry.

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And now others are coming in from off-planet. Soon there'll be an influx of True Followers from all over the galaxy to Terra Nova. And when enough are here, my religious organization will be subtly transformed into a political organization."

"But what do your followers believe in? What was your sermon all about?"

"Ah, that's the beauty of it, Anna. I've found the perfect belief, ideally suited to imperfect human nature. The perfect knowledge is the realization that we are unafraid to stray into those actions whose very names are unmentionable. You've heard of Carpocrates?"

"No," I said. "At least I don't think so."

"Your education is sadly lacking. Carpocrates was a second-century Alexandrian, a gnostic. His particular Christian heresy believed in transmigration—that the soul must pass through several bodies before it can be freed from the physical world. And before we can obtain this release from the flesh and pass into the realm of the spirit we have an obligation to commit every kind of act, to render to nature its own. Through sin we shall achieve salvation. The Carpocratians and other similar sects were known, I believe, as the Licentious Gnostics or the Christian Libertines."

"Oh," I said. I understood. "In other words, doctrinally licensed orgies."

"Don't look so shocked, Anna. But if you approach it realistically you'll see that it's a very sensible and attractive religion. I offer my followers the best of all possible worlds—the satisfaction of the spirit, the senses and the flesh."

"I think I'd better be going now," I said.

He laughed. "Poor Anna, I've frightened you off again. Never mind. You're not the first woman to disappear through that door in mortal terror. But you'll come back—the others did."

Not everyone, I thought fiercely. *Not Nancy and not I . . .*

It was true I was frightened. It was not the peculiar rites of the True Followers that disturbed me—I already knew what Thomas Howard was. But as I made my way through the great opulent hall I had a momentary vision of wine flagons and velvet robes scattered carelessly among the pillows—I heard the sensuous rhythms of rebec and drum and saw torchlight glinting on naked limbs. And I knew that what had been easy for Nancy was going to be difficult for me.

As I left the temple I again met the stony gaze of the two graces. And finally I realized why their faces had bothered me. The mouths, the set of the eyes and the angle of the brows were subtly dis-

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torted into expressions of sheer, unbridled lasciviousness.

III

AFTER that I spent most of my time around the inn and the radio shack or on Jock McLaren's boat and feigned a great disinterest in the lights that flickered on the hill in the early morning hours.

But Thomas Howard was not easily ignored. I came back to the inn one day to find the place in an uproar. A Rigelian fisherman was pounding on the bar with his fists and shouting furiously into Pete Jackson's ear.

"What's the matter?" I asked Nancy, who was standing well out of the way in a corner.

"His wife is a True Follower. He found out why she was doing church work till the wee small hours."

"Oh," I said.

Perigordians are on the whole an easygoing lot and inclined to forgive and forget, but on Rigel II the moral climate is more severe and honor is defended at blaster point.

The man was almost incoherent with rage, but I gathered that he was appealing to Pete in his capacity as license inspector to close down the Temple and as magistrate to throw Howard into the nearest dungeon.

"Have you been to the police?" Pete was asking him. Pete looked desperate.

"A pack of imbeciles. They say they can't touch Howard—he hasn't broken any law." He glared at Pete as though holding him personally responsible. "I ask you, is seducing a man's wife not a crime?"

"Not in Perigord," Pete said. "Inadequate sanitation is a crime, yes, but not seduction." He added bleakly: "And the temple's plumbing, I regret to say, is beyond reproach."

"Then," said the Rigelian, "I will take matters into my own hands. I have tried to go through the proper channels—I cannot be held responsible for what may happen now."

We stood outside the inn, the Jacksons and Jock and I, and watched the Rigelians storm the hill. They were a sizeable community and its entire male population had turned out—sturdy, unimaginative fishermen who considered the virtue of their wives and daughters at stake. Their declared intention was to burn the Temple to the ground and beat the Prophet into protoplasm.

The town constabulary—all three of them—had prudently removed itself from the scene. We watched for a long time for the erupting flames and listened for the screams of anguish—but nothing happened.

I said to Jock, "Do you think

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he'll talk his way out of this one?"

"Why not?" I think you underestimate the Prophet. These people—messiahs, dictators or whatever you want to call them—follow a pattern. They deal in emotion, not reason. If you approach them in a state of blind fury it serves them as well as wide-eyed admiration. Possibly better. It's the involvement, the emotional arousal, that's important. It makes people accept leadership."

"I hope you're wrong," I said. "You make him sound invincible. He frightens me enough as it is."

Nothing continued happening on the hill. But after a while the Rigelian mob straggled back, its ranks diminished by about one-third. The offended husband, I noticed, was not among the returnees.

"What happened?" we shouted as soon as they were within earshot.

They looked like men to whom an unspeakable injustice had been done. One of them said, "That damn fool, that Joe—" He threw his arms into the air and gazed skyward as though seeking divine explanation. "He's been converted."

SOON after that the alien ship arrived and for a while at least we forgot about Thomas Howard and his temple.

It came one afternoon while Perigord lay basking and somnolent under a golden sun. I was sitting in a contented stupor in the bow of the *Sophia Prunikos*, trailing one hand in the tepid water and idly wondering why Jock McLaren had never married.

Jock said, "We've got guests."

I gazed at him blankly from under my sun hat, wondering what he was talking about. Then my eyes followed his stare and I saw the small saucer-shaped vessel drifting silently toward the landing field.

"Damn," I said and looked at my wrist, thinking I had forgotten my alarm. I hadn't. Idiotically I held the timepiece to my ear and shook it.

"Relax," Jock said. "If they had needed any help to come in they would have waited for you."

"Whose is it? Do you recognize it?"

He shook his head. "It's no design I've ever seen before."

"Could it be a lifeboat?"

"It's possible. But it's not from an Earth craft.

The ship had disappeared behind the trees, Jock turned the *Sophia Prunikos* toward shore.

We took it for granted the ship had come down on the landing field near Perigord—it was the only one still in use. But half the population of Perigord—the half with aircars—had been out to look and by the time we reached the inn the report was back: the Perigord field was empty.

A half-dozen smaller fields were

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scattered across the planet, relics of the star-crystal boom. They were probably overgrown with weeds but all of them, I remembered, had control towers equipped with video scanners. I could hook into any one of them from the main communications room and chances were they still worked. When spare parts are three months away, circuits are built to last.

Aircars were shooting off in all directions. Things had been quiet up on the hill lately and Perigord was ripe for fresh excitement. Elbowing our way through the crowd, we headed for the radio shack. We had no trouble picking up the ship. It had come down on an old field near an abandoned quarry about two hundred miles from Perigord. The scanner was not much use for fine detail, but we could see clearly enough the odd disk-shaped vessel in the center of the field. It showed no sign of life, human or otherwise.

We sent word to the police and militia that we had located the ship and watched until they arrived on the field—Perigord's three policemen and a dozen or so militiamen. There wasn't much they could do. Several of them walked in a slow circle around the ship, surveying its unbroken, enigmatic surface.

By now a ring of onlookers had gathered. Unobserved by the police, a small boy was throwing stones at the ship. Periodically another aircar would arrive and spill out a cargo of children and picnic baskets. Then the ship's shadow lengthened; the light turned soft and its gold deepened. Some of the spectators lost interest and went home. The others, content to await developments, spread blankets at the edge of the field.

And at last, in the drowsy peace of late afternoon, a hatch opened in the side of the ship.

At my ear Jock said, "Can't you get in any closer?" I fiddled with the knobs. "That's better."

I couldn't get a closeup and I wasn't sorry. Our visitors were about five feet high and roughly ovoid—or more accurately, acorn-shaped—with the broad side uppermost. Their surface color was a sort of blotchy swamp-brown and covered with a network of raised lines like distended blood-vessels. They had four limbs or appendages. A couple of feet up from their conical bottoms ran a long horizontal gash that looked like a crocodile's mouth. There was no head, as such. Rather, the whole creature seemed to consist of a horrible head. The huge eyes, positioned some inches above the mouth-gash, had slits a foot long for pupils and glared like searchlights.

THE police and militia joined forces and moved slowly in

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from the edge of the field. An aircar, impatient for a closer look, flew in and dropped low over the ship. The aliens seemed to notice this—perhaps they were disturbed by the noise or the slight vibration. The upper parts of their bodies tilted backward. The aircar veered, shot across the field and crashed into the trees.

The advancing militia halted. Abruptly. At this point somebody remembered his field radio.

"Number Four field to Perigord."

"Perigord here," I said.

"Can you see what's going on out here?"

"More or less. We saw the aircar crash. Our visitors do that?"

"Can't tell. Could have been mechanical trouble."

"Quite a coincidence," I said. "Could they be armed?"

"Not as far as we can make out. We're clearing the civilians away. The captain wants to try to communicate. Damned if I know how."

I looked at the screen. The police were moving along the fringe of trees, rounding up the scattered knots of people and herding them back to their aircars.

"We're moving up again," the signalman siad. "Guess the CO wants to try sign language. Hang on, I'm getting something—what the hell? Perigord, we're communicating with them—I'm getting pictures, images—"

"You're getting what?"

"Mental images—telepathy. The globs are telepathic. This is going to be garbled, but I'll try to relay it you. They call themselves—the best I can do is something like Bhak'zaa. They come—from another galaxy, that part's clear enough. Now they're telling us why they're here." There was a lengthy pause. Then the militiaman's voice again, speaking very rapidly. "They're overpopulated. They need room to expand. They want—no, that's not right—they intend to plant a colony here. This is the scouting party. They've been running tests—conditions are ideal. For globs. Bhak'zaa." Another pause. "Here are their terms. We can leave. Or we can stay and live in—reservations, ghettos, something like that. If we mind our own business and keep our mouths shut. Otherwise—I won't translate the otherwise. The CO is refusing their terms. He's telling the globs we'll hit them with everything we've got."

"Half a dozen rusty blasters and the courthouse cannon," Jock remarked.

"More communication from the Bhak'zaa— resistance— resistance is useless. They defend themselves the same way they speak—telepathically. I don't understand what they mean by that, but I get an impression of total self-confidence. They don't expect any interference and won't tolerate

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any. The captain says to keep moving up—I think the idea is to make them show their hand. I've lost contact with them now. They've withdrawn." Then I heard a sharp intake of breath and he said, "Oh, my God."

I looked at the screen. Two men were on their knees, hands clutching the sides of their heads.

"Number Four field, what—"

"I don't know. Wait a minute." I heard him shouting a question. "They've hit two men—somehow. Their minds are gone. No speech, no response—nothing." Then he added, "There's the order to fire—" It was the last intelligible thing he said. I saw the line of raised weapons, saw the Bhak'zaa standing unarmed and apparently defenseless before their ship. But the sharp singing whine of the blasters never came. I stared, instead, at a field scattered with limp, jerking, rag-doll figures and heard a voice—the militiaman's voice—that gibbered and babbled horribly in my ears.

THERE was a mass meeting that night in the Interstellar Order of Space-Farers Hall. I came late, for I had stayed to watch the alien ship as long as any light remained. As far as I could tell, the entire population of Perigord was in the hall and just about everyone from the outlying fishing hamlets.

Lined up on chairs across the empty stage were the mayor, the chief of police and the resident psychiatrist from the Perigord General. On the wall behind them hung a fading banner, the flag of Federated Earth. I felt a twinge of panic as I remembered how very far away we were from Earth and from the Federation's paternal arms.

We were told what we already knew too well—that the militia's meager supply of short-range weapons was quite useless against the Bhak'zaa, that any human being who moved in close enough to fire a blaster could expect to have his mind seared inside his skull.

The crowd was tense, restless, belligerent. It was too soon for them to accept the situation as hopeless. They insisted that there must be, there had to be, a way out. There were plenty of suggestions from the floor. Most of them were far-fetched and all of them were impractical.

In a corner of the room where a group of artists and bohemians had gathered a girl rose to her feet. She was gentle-eyed, unworldly in sandals and a long burlap shift. Her face was flushed. She seemed angry.

"Don't you know why the Bhak'zaa attacked you?" she demanded of the crowd. "They came to us and we welcomed them as human beings have always greeted alien races—with soldiers

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and guns. They didn't make the first warlike move—we did. They saw the weapons and felt all those hostile emanations, so of course they had to protect themselves."

I thought this was preposterous, but some of the faces in the audience wore expressions of sympathy.

"Let us go out," the girl said and with an embracing motion of her arms indicated those who sat around her. "We will go with empty hands and with love in our hearts. The Bhak'zaa will know at once we come in a spirit of peace and friendship. You'll see—we'll succeed where the soldiers and the blasters and the bombs have failed."

In the end the meeting decided to let her and her people try their system. There wasn't much point in trying to stop them and I suppose there were those in the crowd who regarded them as small loss in any case.

They were found the next day and brought back to Perigord empty-eyed, whimpering and nearly dead of thirst and exhaustion. Their arms and legs were scratched and bleeding. They had been stumbling blindly through the underbrush.

After that we could do little but watch and wait. On the third evening I got up from the board stiff and exhausted, a nagging headache behind my eyes. I looked at Jock, slumped in the chair beside me. A stranger might not have noticed the fatigue and tension in his face, but they were there. He also looked withdrawn and remote. I wondered what he was thinking.

He reached out and caught my arm. "Come on," he said, "We'll go see Pete and have a beer."

The inn was crowded and noisy. We had trouble finding a place to sit. Then a party of Rigelian fishermen spotted us and called us over to their table. One of them. Bren Tharssen, I had met before—he was a friend of Jock's.

"Evening, Miss Perry," he said. The others moved over silently to make room. Considering the Rigelian temperament and the number of empty beer jugs on the table, they seemed unnaturally subdued.

Bren Tharssen said, "You'll be leaving too, Miss Perry?"

He took me by surprise. "Leaving? Perigord? I haven't even thought about it yet." It was the truth. "Do you think it will come to that?"

He smiled sourly. "I figure it will." Staring into his beer, he said, "I remember when I first came to this planet—must be going on twenty years ago—the wharves were infested with little rodents, like ground-squirrels. They were friendly little devils—made good pets. But they were a damned nuisance. They chewed up the nets gnawed on the ropes." There was a

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pause while he hoisted his mug. Setting it down, empty, he added, "So we killed them all off—poisoned them. Wouldn't have done them any good to sit up and look cute or to bite us on the shins, either. They were a nuisance, so we got rid of them. Now its our turn. Only I'm not waitint—I'm going back to Rigel II."

"Jock?" I said. "Are you leaving?"

"May have to. But it won't make a hell of a lot of difference, in the long run."

Bren Tharssen looked up. "How do you mean?"

"Think about it. Terra Nova is a very small planet. When the Bhak'zaa have filled it up with their surplus population—which shouldn't take long—they're going to be looking around for more territory. Their metabolisms must be pretty much like ours—they want an Earth-type planet." He emptied the beer pitcher into his mug. "Rigel II is an Earth-type planet. So are all the other worlds that the human race has established itself on."

"Including Earth," I said. I felt sick.

"Including Earth. So where are we going to run?"

"Bloody hell," muttered a sad-faced Rigellian sitting next to me. "If you'll pardon my language, Miss."

A long silence fell. Then, at a table behind me, a mug descended with a reverberating crash. I turned around to stare. A set of steel-colored, slightly protuberant eyes bored into mine. Their owner was a large, balding square-jawed man of military bearing. He had a small, precisely clipped gray moustache and a magenta face.

"By God," he said with furious dignity. "By God—they'll never take Earth!"

One of the Rigelians, the drunkest one, started to laugh. His neighbor elbowed him sharply in the ribs and he lapsed into a gloomy silence.

Jock said mildly, "Probably not. Not this two-man scouting party. However—" he reached up as Nancy sped past, relieved her of a full jug—"we haven't seen their navy."

IV

AS THE evening wore on, the atmosphere at our table came more and more to resemble that of a wake. After a while the red-faced gentleman brought his chair over and joined us. He was the only one among us not prepared to admit defeat. He was a retired colonial administrator from Aldebaran VI and he had a low opinion of the capabilities—mental, moral and military—of extraterrestrial races.

"It's small wonder the local militia couldn't handle the job," he told us. "Rotten organization—rotten." He punctuated this remark by rapping his mug-bottom smartly against the tabletop. "But

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send in a company of regulars from Earth. Ha! Then we'll see the beggars take to their heels." A small shower of beersuds flew over the table.

Bren Tharssen said, "It takes three months to send a ship from Earth. We could all be vegetables by then."

"Provided," Jock added, "that Federated Earth is willing to send troops. Why should they risk provoking an interstellar war? Terra Nova is about the least important backwater planet in the galaxy."

"But you said yourself, the Bhak'zaa won't stop with one planet."

"Try to tell that to the Federation," Jock said.

Some sort of commotion was going on at the door. A party of late drinkers had just arrived and apparently they brought news of fresh developments. The word went quickly around the room.

"The Prophet is going out to meet the Bhak'zaa."

At first I thought it was a joke. "Someone," I said, "has a strange sense of humor."

"Wait a minute," Jock said. He rose from the table. I followed him over to the crowd in the doorway. Everyone was talking at once, but a few facts emerged out of the general uproar. En route to the inn, the latecomers had met a group of True Followers on their way home from a mass gathering at the Temple.

There had been no orgy that night. Thomas Howard had led his flock in prayer and meditation and afterward made his announcement: at dawn, alone and armed only with the cosmic powers of the transmundane deity (a phrase that may or may not have been garbled in transmission) he was going out to meet the alien invaders.

I remember that Jock took me by the shoulders and steered me gently but firmly out of the pub and toward the stairs that led up to my room. What with the beer and the general excitement, I was more than a little glassy-eyed.

"Bedtime," he said. "Set your alarm. Our day's going to start early."

I slept very badly that night. In the few hours that remained till dawn I fled for an eternity among the naked stars, pursued through space by something I could not escape. Sometimes it was the Bhak'zaa that slithered noisomely behind me, leaving silver trails of slime across the planets. Sometimes the hunter bore the face of Thomas Howard—and as I ran it was as though my feet were caught in quicksand and I could not move, for those cold hypnotic eyes drew me inexorably back. And at other times I was trapped between the two, the aliens and the prophet, and boxed on both sides by whirling nebulae, so that there was nowhere I could run. I knew that somewhere in that black void

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Jock McLaren was piloting the *Sophia Prunikos* and that if I could only reach her I would be safe. But try as I might I could never find her.

I AWOKE in a half-lit room, throat dry and my heart pounding. Nancy was standing beside the bed. She had shaken me awake and now she was holding out a cup of coffee.

"Come on," she said. "It's nearly daylight. Jock's downstairs. He says you'd best get a move on and why didn't you set the alarm the way he told you to?"

I swallowed the coffee. As I emerged into reality I realized that most of the pounding had settled in my head. I walked downstairs very carefully, for fear of jarring something.

Jock said encouragingly, "You look like hell."

My nightmare was still fresh in my mind and in spite of the remark I fought a wild desire to latch on to him and hang on for dear life.

"Want any breakfast?" Jock asked. I shook my head. The thought revolted me.

"Come on then—over to the radio shack."

I stumbled along with him. "Has Howard left?"

"Not yet. He's still up at the Temple—sacrificing virgins or whatever he does at times like this."

"Then what's the rush?"

"Because the minute the Prophet sets out for that landing field the entire population of Perigord is going to be pounding on your door, looking for a ringside seat. We are going inside and we are securely locking the door before the rush starts."

By this time the Prophet and his flock had moved outside the Temple. We could hear the distant sound of drums and trumpets floating down from the hill. Jock scribbled a No Admittance sign and tacked it to the door. We locked ourselves in and turned on the coffee pot.

The music grew steadily louder until the air was resplendent with fanfares and flourishes and the sprightly jangle of tambourines. It sounded absurdly cheerful—almost exuberant. But I suppose the sounding brass and tinkling cymbals were meant to encourage the troops—it was not yet a time for dirges.

We went to the window. Jock said, "You've got a visitor."

A small chill ran down my spine. The procession had stopped outside the radio shack.

Someone tapped gently at the door. I opened it and stared out at Thomas Howard standing quietly on the step in the gray light of pre-dawn. He was a splendid figure, draped from neck to feet in deep blue velvet crusted heavily with silver threads. He wore a

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small cool smile. I could almost believe he was enjoying himself.

"Hello, Anna," he said. "May I come in?"

I hesitated. "I'll come out." I was oddly disturbed at the thought of his entering the radio shack. His smile broadened slightly. Why did I always have this wretched feeling that he could see the thoughts revolving in my skull?

He said, "They tell me you can watch the field on video. I thought I'd stop to pay my regards and let you know I'm leaving."

"Thank you," I said stupidly. Was this his way of saying goodbye? I wondered what was going on behind those impenetrable eyes.

"You haven't been back to see me, Anna. I had hoped by now to number you among my flock." His eyes looked past me and through the open doorway. They rested very briefly on Jock McLaren placidly drinking coffee, his feet propped on my desk.

"But you've had other interests," Howard went on in the same gently chiding tone. "Never mind, Anna, there'll be plenty of time later on. One of these days you'll come back to the Temple."

One of these days? I wondered how many days were left to any of us in Perigord.

"Goodbye, Thomas," I said. "Good luck."

"No," he said. "I didn't come to say goodbye." After a pause he added: "You've always interested me, Anna. You have a mind of your own. I like that. It provides a challenge. I decided some time ago that when I come to take over there will be a place for you in my government. Think about it."

I shook my head. "You know my answer to that."

He turned to go.

"We'll see," he said.

I WATCHED the procession move off, a bright stream of sound and color in the pale gray morning. They were all in ceremonial dress, the men as gaudy as birds in their jewel-colored tights and tunics, the women in long, high-waisted, supple gowns of silk and velvet.

At the bottom of the street was a small paved courtyard, a sort of unofficial town square. Here they halted again. The Followers gathered about the Prophet in a semi-circle, facing in the general direction of the field where the aliens waited, and began to chant the final prayer before battle. The chanting went on for a long time. I went in and shut the door. I found that I was shivering slightly—whether from nerves or from the chill air I found it hard to say. Jock poured me a fresh cup of coffee.

"Dragging it out a hell of a time,

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aren't they?" he said sourly. "Maybe they're hoping the Bhak'zaa will get bored and go away."

It was still about an hour to dawn, but the light was getting better. I sat down at the board and switched on the screen. In a minute or two I had a good clear picture of the landing field. The great silver disk was visible, but there was no other sign of the Bhak'zaa.

I said, "Jock, why do you think he's doing this?"

"You know him better than I do. I can only judge by what you've told me. Didn't you ask him?"

"No. I've learned not to ask him questions. I used to—but I never liked the answers."

"Why do you think he's going out there?"

I thought about it for a while. "I suppose he's desperate." Even as I said it I realized that it was true—and the idea surprised me. It was strange to think that Thomas Howard could ever be desperate. "I've told you what he's aiming for with this business of the religion. As long as I've known him—and I suppose before that, too— he's been mad for power. And I know he can control people—I've seen him do it. I think eventually he might succeed."

"But now the Bhak'zaa are standing smack in his way."

I nodded. "Even if they were content just to take over Terra Nova, Howard would have to start all over again somewhere else. But really, it's worse than that, isn't it? They won't stop here."

"Not bloody likely," Jack said. "Not when that scouting party goes home and reports that they can take planets away from us like candy from a baby."

"And there go all the Prophet's dreams of taking over the galaxy. He hasn't got much to lose by going out there, has he?"

"Except his mind."

"That's what I'm wondering. I just can't see him as a martyr. He's too cold-blooded, too calculating. Do you suppose he really thinks he can drive them away?"

"Hard to say. But then he's never been short of self-confidence. He knows he has this power over human beings—I imagine he's estimated the possibility of its working on aliens and decided it's worth the risk. Anyway, men like Howard—messiahs, dictators—have never lacked for courage when something got in their way."

Remembering a thing Howard had once told me, I said, "He thinks this talent of his may be telepathic, extra-sensory—I'm not sure of the right term. Some sort of special gift. Perhaps if it works on other humans who haven't got these mental powers—or don't know how to use them—it may work on a race that does."

"Let's hope he's right. Personally I'm inclined to think he's just

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a very skilled mass hypnotist. But who knows, maybe he can hypnotize the Bhak'zaa."

The chanting had stopped. We went to the window. The Prophet raised his right arm in a gesture of benediction, climbed into a waiting aircar and was gone.

I went back to the board. Jock said, quite casually, "Where's the aircar that belongs to the radio shack? Around the back?"

I nodded, surprised.

"Tank full?"

"Yes—why?"

"Because I think I'll take a run out to that field. Hold the fort, Anna." I twisted my head to stare at him. He was already on his feet and halfway out of the shack.

"Jock, you're not—" He had caught me totally off guard. I've always despised hysterical women, but I'm afraid I behaved like one then. "Jock, for God's sake, come back here." I realized suddenly I was shaking.

He looked at me as though he had never really noticed me before. "Don't worry, Anna—I'll be back. I was born cautious—it's one of the reasons I'm still around. Mr. Howard can play the hero, if he likes. I'll be the one skulking through the bushes."

He came back to the board, leaned over and kissed me. His hand rested for a moment on my cheek. "I'll see you later, Anna."

And then, like the Prophet, he was gone.

I WATCHED and waited through a half-hour that seemed like a half-century. There on my screen was the backdrop to the final act—the menacing bulk of the alien ship, the field partly hidden by a tangled mass of weeds and creepers, the shadowy fringe of trees that marked its edges.

The first pale rays of the sun filtered through my windows. The curtain had risen but the stage remained empty. I sat, hands clenched on the sides of my chair, waiting for the play to begin. I wish I could say that I was conscious of my unique position—sole spectator at a galatic *dénouément*. It has a nice ring to it—but it belongs to a different kind of story. Human destiny did not concern me at that moment—only Jock McLaren's safety.

An aircar landed on the far side of the field—the Prophet had arrived. He stood for a moment beside the vehicle, his head thrown back to watch the rising sun. Then he walked with stately deliberation to the center of the stage.

Of Jock there was no sign at all. I guessed that whatever his plans, he would be likely to leave the aircar somewhere well out of sight and approach the field on foot.

I held my breath. A hatch had opened in the side of the ship. One at a time, the Bhak'zaa slithered out.

Howard had his back to me. He

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stood perfectly still, his feet apart as though braced against a strong wind. His robe rippled out from his shoulders and caught the first sunlight in its silver threads.

The Bhak'zaa, moving side by side, came within a few feet of him and stopped. I had a beautifully clear picture—so clear that I could see the faint palpitation of the two vertical pupils in their eyes. I thought—though perhaps my imagination was at work—that the distended vessels crisscrossing their bodies grew larger and more livid.

Howard had turned a little and I could see his profile. His features were composed, his arms extended, palms-up, in a gesture of friendship or appeasement that surely could mean nothing to the Bhak'zaa. The devices he had used to stir the senses of the crowd, to make their minds open and receptive to him, were useless now. Had it all been a stage-trick? I wondered. I knew the power of those strange eyes and that rich, compelling voice. But had I, like so many others, been swept away by the cry of the trumpet, the insistent rhythm of the drums, by the long-submerged emotions that boiled up and engulfed my reason?

The Prophet knew how to reach the primitive, the irrational depths of human nature. But the Bhak'zaa were not human. Stripped of his stage paraphernalia and the force of his persuasive tongue, thrown up against the blank wall of a totally alien mind, what could he hope to acheive but martyrdom?

Now he appeared to be speaking—head thrown back, arms uplifted—as he unleashed, into emptiness, all the power at his command.

For what seemed like an impossibly long time—though I suppose it was only minutes, or seconds—nothing happened. The actors stood frozen upon the stage, locked in silent, unseen combat. Whatever invisible forces met headlong in those few feet of space between them, for the moment at least an impasse had been reached.

I felt I could bear it no longer—I wanted it to be finished and done with. I waited for the hands to drop, the rigid spine to crumple, the cool eyes to go suddenly empty as the mind dissolved behind them.

But still the Prophet spoke and the Bhak'zaa stood motionless and unresponding, like great slimy fungi risen out of the soil.

I thought I saw Howard begin to sway. And then Jock McLaren came up behind the aliens from somewhere in the woods and quietly caved in the backs of their skulls with a fish club.

I watched him drag the bodies over to the ship and stuff them one at a time through the opening. Then I looked at Howard. I didn't need to see his face to know what

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had happened. For several minutes he stood motionless and stared into the empty place where the Bhak'zaa had been. Then his knees buckled and he crumped slowly to the ground.

Jock came back across the field, wiping his hands on his pocket handkerchief. He set the Prophet gently on his feet and half-led, half-dragged him away from the ship and into the shelter of the trees.

Then the ship lifted way from the ground on a sudden pillar of flame. I guessed that Jock had sent it home with a message from Perigord, one I hoped the Bhak'zaa would understand.

THAT night we sat outside the inn and listened to the True Followers singing in the Temple. We couldn't hear the words but the melody drifted down to us—threnodic, liturgical, inexpressibly moving. Now and then it was drowned out entirely by a burst of laughter from the pub or by a sudden exuberant credenza on the Rigelian zyga. The rest of Perigord was celebrating a great victory; that their participation was indirect and their understanding of the battle strategy nonexistent dampened their joy not one whit. But up on the hill they had not yet begun to rejoice. Tonight they paid tribute to the fallen leader, to the messiah who had sacrificed himself to save the human race.

I took Jock's hand. "Everybody thinks the Prophet did it alone," I said. "Are we going to leave it at that?"

"Why not? He's the one who's sitting in the hospital with his mind blasted out, not me. God knows he's earned any credit he gets." And so I kept my private knowledge to myself for fifty years.

They put the Prophet, what was left of him, in the General Hospital, along with the other victims of the Bhak'zaa—and after a while they built a special institution for them. Rather pointlessly, as it turned out, for none of them lived to see the edifice completed.

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Howard was the last one to go; I'm told he clung tenaciously to existence—of a kind—for half a year.

After that the institution was converted into a hostel for the pilgrims who had begun to flow in ever-increasing numbers into Perigord. What was disastrous for the Prophet's personal dreams of power was, ironically, a shot in the arm for the faith he had founded. The followers made sure that the story of mankind's last-minute salvation, suitably dramatized and embellished, went out on the next Earth-bound ship. What part Pete Jackson may have played in this publicity drive I would not venture to guess; except to say that he was a good businessman and a tireless civic booster and surely could not have overlooked the advantages of owning a tavern in Mecca.

At any rate, the big public networks on Earth seized upon the story and the Temple at Perigord became the spiritual home of a galactic faith. Martyrdom, however uncomfortable and inconvenient for the individual, is a splendid thing for a religion.

And for commerce.

I suppose that quite possibly in five years—or five hundred—the Bhak'zaa may return to our corner of the universe. But next time there may be no Prophet (and no Jock McLaren) to drive them away. But I prefer to think that Jock's display of primitive violence may have disconcerted their leaders enough to send them slithering off in some other direction. There are, after all, plenty of stars in the sky.

We've orbited a good many of those stars ourselves, Jock McLaren and I. About the time that the pilgrims started to arrive, Jock dug out his battered copy of *Plimm's Guide to the Inhabited Planets*. I wasn't sorry to move on. It was clear that Perigord would never be quite the same again. Already it was getting crowded. The sea was full of pleasure boats and the comfortable clublike atmosphere had vanished from the inn now that there were so many unfamiliar faces.

It was hard for me, harder than I ever thought it would be, to keep silent when I heard over and over again the details of how the Prophet went forth unarmed and vanquished the alien invaders.

And then there was the statue, the one they commissioned to stand beside the Thomas Howard Monument. It was fifteen feet high and carved in the faithfully realistic avante-garde style they called the New Objectivism. Wherever I went in Perigord I seemed to pass it and always in spite of myself I looked up. And the Prophet's granite eyes stared back at me, mocking me. On the stone lips was a small, cold smile of triumph. ★

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Faster than the speed of light or a woman's love are . . . .

BUBBLES WHEN THEY BURST

R.A. LAFFERTY

THE Director of Publications for the Institute has stated that devices that succeed are more interesting then devices that fail. This one did succeed several times under conditions that are not practical to duplicate—and when it failed it really failed. But there is a chance that it may yet succeed under normal controlled conditions and it will matter very much if it does.

From the case book of the Institute we give that early episode—at the same time a qualified success and a grotesque fail-

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ure—of the sad death of Cecil Corn:

PROJECT: Fence Around Us.
PRINCIPLES: Cecil Corn and others of the Institute.
PROBLEM: The Speed of Light (The Fence Around Us) as limitor to our hopes of far travel, unless a breakthrough is made, a new framework set up or a new aspect of matter discovered.
PROCEDURE: As stated by Corn, if anything can be found that travels at a speed greater than light the fence is breached. An examination of all transmission does not reveal anything that travels at a speed greater than light. However, it is discovered that we do not know the speed of one thing: Telepathy or thought transference. Corn examined this.

He found that telepathy travels at a variety of speeds, from olfactory (bluntly, the speed of smell, for pairs of telepaths whose body auras must be in contact for transmission) through speed of sound (for certain pairs who convey by pseudo-sound) to Earth-Instantaneous speed (roughly radio-light speed). With the human element present, it was not possible to distinquish Earth-instantaneous from a real instantaneous. Earth did not provide a long enough base line.

Corn—himself an adequate telepath—set up a number of moon contacts. He convinced himself that telepathy might be truly instantaneous, but he failed to convince others. The human element still ate up what should have been a second and a half time lag between instantaneous telepathy and radio transmission.

Corn set up contact with a young Chinese named Francis Pung who was on Mars mission. The two were in good rapport. The time lag on test night should have been four and a half minutes. If telepathy were truly instantaneous its message should have been received and recorded completely before the synchronous radio message arrived at Earth. The experiment was well witnessed.

Corn sat at the symbol machine and began to receive and record. Corn knew these first symbols in advance, but not others. Then his Mars contact went to impassioned voice and Corn

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recorded the message in almost hysterical words: *Corn, believe me that I transmit by mind and at this time. Whatever you will hear about me shortly will not change it. The symbols now become impossible to me. . .*

Corn recorded the words and sat back bewildered. A four-minute silence ensued and then the radio message began. It gave the first symbols as Corn had recorded them. Then it gave further symbols which were not known in advance and which Corn had not set down. Then it gave the news that Francis Pung had dropped dead in the Mars radio booth just after the beginning of the experiment.

Corn could not have known that Pung would die. He had received a message of sorts four minutes before the radio message. But the episode became and is still known as the Great Corn Hoax.

Aloysius Shiplap and others of us persuaded Corn to go on experimenting.

"This next one has to be it," Corn said, "Another failure would kill me."

Corn set up another Mars contact with Sid Sideral, a man in such perfect health that he was a marvel.

Concurrently with this final test of Corn's our Valery Mok set up an experiment of her own. She was in rapport with her friend Corn. As the test went on she set down what went through the mind of Corn as he received the message of Sideral, and as he believed he was recording it.

Valery's notes—which were not time-stamped—are these:

"Perfect, Sid, nothing will go wrong this time. Why is Aloysius fiddling with my head and mumbling? Receiving and recording nicely, Sid, if only they would let me alone. Why are the idiots taking off my necktie and pouring water over me? Why are they coming at me with a needle? I've had all my shots. Sid, I've beat the jinx. You're a partner too healthy to die on me. Ah, ah, Sid—the jinx had one trick left. I lose again. I died on you."

He did. Cecil Corn died at the beginning of the experiment and he had recorded nothing. What Valery Mok recorded was not clocked. But she made affidavit that Corn had been receiving from Sideral exactly the same data that came by ra-

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dio four minutes later that she had heard it as an undercurrent to the thoughts of Corn with whom she was in rapport.

The press does not usually call a lady a shameless liar, but in this case it did. The incident is still known as the Great Mok Mockery.

FURTHER PROCEDURE: Those of us who would like to believe have had our faith shaken. We have made a dozen further tests of simultaneous distant radio and telepathic transmission. In every case we have found that telepathic transmission over great distance is at radio-light speed and not beyond it. We cannot believe that the two incidents were conscious frauds, but they may have been unconscious ones.

CONCLUSION: Draw your own.

DISPOSAL OF CASE: Open, and subject to review.

EXPECTATIONS: Meager.

AND that is the way it remained in the Case Book. But the case did remain in the open file and Gregory Smirnov of the Institute pulled it out once a year to review it. He did so now with a quorum present.

"It always makes me sad to see that folder on Cecil," said Valery. "He was such a sweet man. You remember the funny way he had of scattering cigar ashes over everything? And his little trick of falling asleep in the middle of a sentence? Well, you've done your duty, Gregory. Put it away for another year."

"No. I'm thinking of reopening the experiment," said Gregory.

"You're crazy," Glasser said.

"Not crazy. A little odd, perhaps. I wouldn't be director of the Institute if I weren't. The problem remains. A breakthrough must be made, a new framework set up or a new aspect of matter has to be discovered. If matter is only what we have believed it to be we are limited forever. But there is a missing factor. All we need is a proper sort of relay to make the idea work."

"And do you know where to find such a relay?" Aloysius asked.

"I believe it could be found in a hundred impractical places every minute," Gregory said. "First we must somehow catch that relay on the fly and prove that it does work. Then we will have to synthesize it and have it always ready. It will not solve our problem. It will only enable us to state our problem seriously and go to work on it. We will prove that there is one special case of instantaneous speed—beyond radio-light speed.

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Then we will seek means to bring other things to that speed. We will have broken out of our framework and set the problem in its proper context."

"You speak as though the relay already existed," said Valery.

"Why, it does," Gregory said. "That is, it exists sometimes. That is, I think it does."

"If it exists, then use it," said Glasser. "Make the test."

"I intend to if I can. But the relay is tricky and hard to come by. Epiktistes, who has analyzed a million or so cases of its operation, believes that it has an effective life of between five and thirty seconds—no more."

"Well, Gregory, you will have to acquire a number of the relays to experiment effectively," Aloysius said, "or you will have to find ways of extending their life. The relays—are they expensive?"

"Not as you mean it, Aloysius."

"Does it take long to construct one?"

"About ninety years on an average."

(On the same day that Gregory Smirnov reopened the Cecil Corn Case, the Nine Conspirators of Nebula Proxima were sentenced to death by a Court on Kentauron Mikron. We thought you might not have heard of it.)

Gregory Smirnov nibbled at mountains of data for days. He seemed to make a dozen false starts. All institute people were clammy when they were onto something that wasn't yet ripe. They would never give an honest man a hint of what they were onto. But somebody had to bring Smirnov out of his trance.

"Just what are you working on, Gregory?" asked Glasser after a routine meeting of the Institute people. "Or rather—since it's apparent that you're not doing any work at all—what are you thinking about?"

"About electric eels when they die," said Gregory.

"Oh? I didn't know you were interested in them? And what else?"

"Gegenschein, condensers, bird entrails, missing factors, oracular pythons, thanatakolouthia (death-trains or death-echoes), backlash, young wives' tales, shackling emancipation from frameworks, hysteresis, collapsing fields, bubbles when they burst."

"Oh, come now!" protested Valery.

"Atoms or systems into ruin hurl'd,
And now a bubble burst, and now a world," issued the machine Epiktistes.

"What? What?" demanded Glasser. "Who is making less sense, the man or the machine?"

"It's from A. Pope," issued Epiktistes. "I thought it was pertinent."

"One riddle at a time," said

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Charles Cogsworth, the humble husband of Valery. "What of the shackling emancipation from frameworks, Gregory?"

"One framework actually—that in which we live. The Baconian and Comptean Revolutions freed us from the old frameworks centuries before we were born. But they prisoned us in a tighter one—that of doctrinaire materialism. Now we are forbidden to have superstitions at all, so a most interesting field is closed to us. We cannot get out of our present frame, we cannot even come near its borders—but there are some answers to be found in those borderlands."

"To those of us who like bird entrails—and there are less than two of us in the world—your interest is welcome," said Aloysius. "But what *is* your interest, Gregory?"

"The emphasis on speed," said Gregory Smirnov. "In reading fortunes from bird entrails, great speed was necessary. The living bird was ripped open and studied. Whatever happened, it happened fast."

"There's another one," issued the machine Epiktistes: " 'All at once, and nothing first, Just as bubbles do when they burst.' From O.W. Holmes. That's the way the One-Hoss Shay broke down."

"What about condensers, backlash, collapsing fields?" asked Cogsworth.

"Oh, we explain them with equations, but we don't really explain. Why should the old electromagnetic animal kick hardest just after it has died? Why is the echo stronger than the voice?"

"And young wives' tales?" asked Valery. "I've been a young wife for more years than seems possible."

"You came close to it in the Great Mok Mockery," said Gregory. "An old wife would be too sane to conceive of such an approach."

"What does happen when electric eels die?" demanded Glasser. "What does happen to bubbles when they burst?"

"I don't know," said Gregory, "but either of them would serve as a relay—for too short an interval. A relay, but not a good enough relay. I need something more intricate than an eel and more tenuous than a bubble. And I need it exactly when it vanishes."

THAT was all the Institute people could get from Gregory Smirnov that day. They tried to find from Epiktistes, the machine resident at the Institute, what sort of relay it was of which he had analyzed millions of cases.

"I'm almost as much in the dark as you," Epiktistes issued. "I've analyzed millions of cases of millions of things for that man. What he calls a relay I may be calling something else."

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"But what is it that has an effective life of between five and thirty seconds and no more?" insisted Charles Cogsworth.

"The pledge of a stranger, the allegiance of a Martian, the interest of a dilettante, the love of a gray-eyed woman," issued Epiktistes.

"Epikt, you can be as exasperating as a man," said Valery.

But Gregory was going ahead with something. He announced to them that he had set up a new test which would have to be the conclusive test.

"Then you have found a good way of obtaining your relays?" Aloysius asked.

"No. I have not found out anything new," Gregory said. "But I have accidentally acquired the use of a bunch of the relays. I believe that they will serve for the test and the proof. Then I will begin my long hard search to synthesize the things and to apply the things to more solid matter—or to prove that matter is less solid than it seems."

"Are you still bothered by our framework?" Cogsworth asked.

"Yes. We are so superstitious that we cower in the middle of our frame. If we are so sure, what are we afraid of? We have insisted that life is no more than chemical-electro-magnetic phenomena, but we are afraid to consider that life may have such backlash as all other similar phenomena show. I wonder how they will play it down when I finally prove it all."

It was a major experiment and it involved nine radio receivers, nine conventional telepathic receivers, nine special telepathic receivers. It began.

The nine special telepaths received and recorded nine separate symbols. This was important. These symbols were not known by anyone on Earth. They were known by only one person on the originating asteroid up to the moment they were given for transmission. They would not be verified until they were received by radio.

Then the nine special telepaths received and recorded in words—short messages and still shorter—total transmissions from five to thirty seconds, no more. Then silence and the wait for the messages by radio and normal telepathy to begin.

"Who were they?" asked Aloysius who had the gift of always being in the dark as to details of a project.

"Oh, the nine conspirators of Nebula Proxima," said Gregory. "They have just been executed on the asteroid where the conspiracy was planned."

"And they are transmitting after they are dead?"

"Certainly not, Aloysius. We could not believe that and still live in our narrow framework. The instant of the collapsing field is still

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a part of the life of the field. The bursting of the bubble must still be accounted a phenomenon of the bubble. They serve—just after their apparent deaths—as the instantaneous relay."

"This was the missing factor?"

"Yes. It was the factor of the instantaneous transmission when Francis Pung died on Mars. It was the factor when Cecil Corn died on Earth. The death-instantaneous relay works in both directions."

"And you believe that you can synthesize such a relay?"

"I am too old to break out of the frame, Aloysius. My chilly faith constrains me to believe that everything is material. And anything that is material can be reproduced in matter."

"And what if the frame is all a mistake?"

"In either case, the problem can now be tackled."

"It was of this that Epiktistes analyzed a million cases?"

"Yes. The more clearly verified cases of death-simultaneous apparitions and messages."

"How were the nine criminals induced to cooperate?"

"What had they to lose? They were all reasonable men, save on politics."

The slow minutes had trickled away. The radio transmission began to come through. At the same time arrived the messages from trained telepath to trained telepath—all coming at radio-light speed and each received and recorded by an operator in his own cubicle.

The symbols were those nine already received. This itself was verification. The brief comments of the criminals were also verification. They were flashes of wit and irony sparked by details of their own executions that could not have been known before.

SO INSTANTANEOUS transmission in a special case was proved. And once proved, it opened the gates? And many men bent their genius to the follow-up, the synthesizing of a comparable relay?

Well, no—it didn't happen like that. Gregory Smirnov and Aloysius Shiplap and Valery Mok and a few are working on the follow-up and they are getting some good leads. But the thing was not accepted by the Credentials Society, though they had their own impartial men observing and taking part in the experiment. Three men of the Credentials Society had even served as receivers for three of the criminals.

The results were rejected by Credentials because "the veracity of the Testimony of convicted Criminals may not be accepted as Evidence in any Prime Matter under Dispute."

It is still called the Great Gregory Gallimaufry. ★

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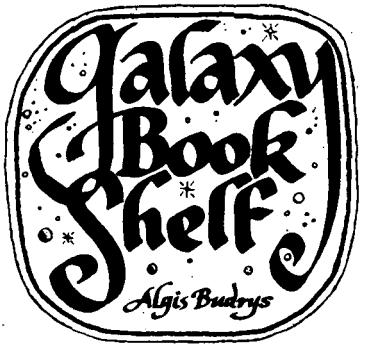

WE'VE spoken of this before. While the writing of fiction is usually a cerebral process, the reading of it is not. While a number of readers have the capacity and sometimes the inclination to appreciate the well-turned phrase, few have the patience to take delight in a series of them over sixty thousand consecutive words. Many people quote from Shakespeare. Fewer have read him except under compulsion.

The most popular writers are semiliterate. Quib me no quibbles—certainly there are literate works of fiction that have enjoyed audiences of millions—over the tens and hundreds of years. The overnight success of the masses, however, is invariably written as though the author regarded the language as an impediment. And that is precisely so. Language, in any form, interferes between the reader and the writer's concept.

It remains for the mass-successful author only to restrict himself to concepts that have already been half-communicated for him by the ambient popular mood. After that the purpose of his language is to deliver the recognition signal and get out of the way—to travel no graceful paths, to cling to every rut of popular grammar, to be completely unobtrusive—except, perhaps, to a teacher or a critic.

Thus James Bond, Tarzan and the Valentine Smith of *Stranger in a Strange Land's* back half. Thus Leon Uris, Arthur Hailey, Harold Robbins and A.E. van Vogt.

But this is an old assertion here. Now toward a new point:

Hardly anyone is so miserable as to write badly on purpose. In his mind any writer chosen at random will have an image of what constitutes good writing. And though he will from time to time deliberately depart from it in his actions for one pressing reason or another, as long as he holds the image and feels he can dupli-

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cate it in his actions, he still considers himself a good writer. The reams of flawed or uninspired copy in his closet do not have, for him, the weight of the three or four results from the times when he was acting in accordance with the image. Though he has authored *Blood on My Jets* a thousand times, he is redeemed for himself by one time when the muse whispered to him while he wasn't busy with something else. And that's how it should be—for his sake. But suppose he wrote *Blood on My Jets* rather well? When he goes to his grave with his one manuscript and consigns the piles of lead novelettes for *Stupendous Science Monthly* to the dungheap, what is he heaping on what may be a vast congregation of fans?

Does a writer see two audiences? A good audience for his work in accordance with his image of good writing and then, for the other stuff, an ignominious one? Does he perhaps see one audience without the power to differentiate?

These are terrible traps to set for one's own soul.

But they need concern only him, not us. For the reader need make no discriminations. Either a story takes hold of him or it doesn't. If he has an analytical bent and would like to ponder why he was swept up—when the story's finished and readership has ended—that, too, is undoubtedly a pleasure to some, but it has nothing to do with being a reader. It has to do with being possessed of an educated, intelligent brain—like that of most writers. That is when reader and writer come closest together as human beings on the common ground of rationality. Reading is an experience of the spinal column, which knows only pleasure or pain and cares nothing for the writer.

WRITERS rarely meet readers. They meet a fair number of people who have had the experience of reading and are willing to discuss it. A reader is in a condition of autohypnosis and has narrow interests. The circle of a writer's acquaintances, on the other hand, is bound to be as witty and articulate as he was while he was constructing a hypnotism. And here is a trap for all of us. Because it seems possible that a writer might mistake his acquaintances for readers and the appreciation of his intelligence for the same thing that makes readers seek out his work.

A writer of fiction is by definition incapable of reading it. He does something else; he decodes the words on the paper, examines the structure of narrative which results from their arrangment and transposes this into an appreciation, much like Patton visiting Waterloo. Prosaists dig poetry, however—and movies; better yet,

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music or photography. Writers have forgotten what it's like to pick up a book and just let the story envelop them. There is no being carried fully away, as there is in the concert hall or the Odeon. It's a recognized price one pays, but perhaps its full extent is not appreciated by all those who pay it. For except for the rich, uninhibited few who fantasize directly onto paper as Ian Fleming and Edgar Rice Burroughs did, writers as they go along tend more and more to feel that good writing is writing on which a high degree of rationality has been expended—most often, visibly expended—and that any writing they do that has not received this benefit is the less, in direct proportion.

And there are of course other occupational specialties staffed by people who take the same view. These are editors, critics and career intellectuals. (We exclude publishers; publishers as a class converse either in figures or in news releases).

So there are few editorial workers who do not feel guilty about their coarser associations. I met the man who wrote the blurbs for NAL's edition of *I, THE JURY*. He was a broken man, but was recovering slowly in his Greenwich Village music store.

More to the point, there are few people a writer meets who by their nature and inclination do not reinforce the belief that only painstaking work is good work—that is, work worthy of consideration. What few people seem to propose is that while there is a difference between good and bad composition, there is no one-to-one relationship between this and good or bad communication.

In all my years I have never met a raped mind that was restored to innocence by a book. I have seen people energized by stories, but they are not necessarily driven in any consistent direction. I also have a little list of stories I consider better than other stories and I can give you reasons. But I can't always give them in a manner coherent to you, because sometimes I find that the enjoyable things in a story will not yield to description in analytical terms, just as I find that a book that analyzes 200 proof can sometimes be rather dull. In fact, downright discouraging. One is led to the conclusion that the analytical approach is not consistently effective, and that to attempt to substitute something para-logical, as Damon Knight does with his symbolic evaluations, is to plunge into a morass. Such a morass as one would be a fool to be defending throughout the remainder of one's professional lifetime, as I would have to do were I to construct one of my own. Then again, I'm not as smart as Damon, or as any top-flight critic.

But I wander from my point (a

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sure sign of advancing senility). In fact, I have two points (a sure sign of evil).

POINT One: Perhaps there are a number of skilled people demonstrably intelligent, personally charming, professionally knowledgeable and critically acclaimed who are writing good books and giving pleasure to fewer and fewer readers. Question A, under that heading: Are we selecting those writers who are by nature better equipped to entertain and leaving entertainment to despised mediocrities who may—here we come doubling back on our tracks—in fact not be as mediocre as all that?

B, under the same heading: Is there a Mission to improve the nature and condition of the world by telling Important stories—and if so, will you show me the Improver who is not doing it by cutting down his readership to an elite? An in-effect elite of semi-professionals?

C, if there is no Mission, why aren't we teaching *From Russia With Love* in English Lit courses? Was it not a signal event in the history of that field? Didn't it speak for the Cold War in exactly the same way *A Tale of Two Cities* spoke for the French Revolution? Isn't it qualified on a dozen other counts? True, most of the younger generation never heard of it, but how many of them do you suppose would have heard of Dickens if the establishment weren't keeping him alive?

Oh, I'm oversimplifying, all right. But I would like to see somebody keep nudging at this; not because it will change or improve anything, but because it will drag us one step closer to cutting down the confused to a numerically smaller—but unfortunately no less potent—elite, as always happens.

(As usual, I did my homework. I had some books to review. I commend to you James Blish's AND ALL THE STARS A STAGE —Doubleday, $4.95—because it is an entertaining book, which I suspect Jim thinks is minor. The rest I commend to whatever fate awaits the lazy, the pretentious, the greedy—in short, the confused. As usual when I produce a long essay intended to cut rather close to the bone, I chose not to write the reviews, for fear someone might think I was going from the general to the particular).

Finally, I'd like to apologize to all the people whose letters I never answered. I didn't feel I was in a position to get into either a good or bad relationship based on this column.

And with that, we close. Point Two is that your faithful reviewer has no further grounds for believing himself even marginally competent. It has been about five years, I thank you for your kind attention and I am hanging it up. ★

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JOHN W. CAMPBELL

June 8, 1910-July 11, 1971

Science fiction lost one of its brightest stars when John W. Campbell passed on at the age of 61. A pioneering writer in the genre under his own name and the pseudonym Don A. Stuart, he became editor of *Astounding* (later *Analog*) in 1937. Continuing in that post until his death, he made monumental contributions to the field. He published the first stories of many science-fictioneers who today are famous. Perhaps more than any man, he helped forge what is often called the "Golden Age of Science Fiction."

Over the years, he tirelessly continued to define, shape and give direction to science-fiction by deeds and words. The latter, often controversial, were always thought-provoking. Here are some memorable examples:

Science fiction comes when science takes some of the tension of terror out of the future tense. (Astounding, June, 1939)

No literature is sound, no philosophy of action workable, if it doesn't take a hard look at itself and consider whether the Eternal Fitness of Things isn't getting a little tight across the shoulders. (Introduction, 2nd edition, Cloak of Aesir, 1952)

Mainstream literature is, in fact, a narrow subdivision of the field of science fiction . . . Science fiction includes the total scope from the remote past to the far future—and anywhere in the universe . . . Mainstream literature is . . . a small local eddy in the whole stream of history, which is the proper field of science fiction. (From a speech made to Eastern Science Fiction Association, 1963)

Good science fiction is relevant—more relevant than any other kind of fiction. But it isn't properly relevant to what you're thinking now; it's relevant to what you had better be thinking next year and the rest of your life. (From a private letter, 1970)

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THE MOON

JACK
WILLIAMSON

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CHILDREN
conclusion

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

The Moon Children were born to the wives of three lunar explorers who had become mysteriously contaminated during an unscheduled moon landing in response to a light phenomenon.

NICK and KYRIE were born days apart, mentally precocious and aware of each other before they met—and of GUY before he was born some months later. Earth had had experience of the dangers of contact with alien biocosms—particularly those of Jupiter and Mercury—and the children were hated and feared. KYRIE and GUY were rejected even by their parents and all three were brought up under laboratory conditions under the aegis of COSMOS, an official body. Their immediate supervision was in the hands of Nick's parents, YURI MARKO and Dr. CAROLINA CARTER.

By the age of seven NICK and KYRIE were matching wits with Earth's top scientists. NICK solved the mystery of the propulsion system used by Jovian delta-life—and traded his knowledge for some of the moon grit that had contaminated his father. The grit held an instant message for the children. It told them they were not children at all—and not human.

From the moon grit, fashioned by GUY into a mysteriously energized tetrahedron, NICK and KYRIE learn their real mission. They are to build a gigantic tachyon tower to guide in the FTL ships of an advanced interstellar culture capable of solving Earth's growing problems with alien biocosms. Construction of the tower, however, would tax Earth's global resources. So world governments vote instead to dismantle COSMOS and cope individually with the problems of the invading biocosms.

Skygate, formerly site of COSMOS, becomes a U.S. military installation. NICK and KYRIE continue their study of the tetrahedron, but their problems are compounded by the fact that GUY, growing increasingly animal-like, becomes jealous of them. The new world situation also forces the return of GUY'S father, TOM HODIAN, from self-imposed exile. GUY becomes pathetically attached to his father and further estranged from KYRIE and NICK.

With Earth now virtually in a state of siege by the alien biocosms, a new menace appears. Metal ants, energy-consuming and impervious to attack, overrun Skygate. Suspected of collaboration with the alien menace, KIM HODIAN, the chronicler of these events, is being flown into custody when his plane is downed in an

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apparent attack by Jovian delta-life.

He comes to in a hospital. While he recovers, Earth is slowly losing the battle of the biocosms. But he hears rumors leading him to believe that GUY has excaped Skygate with the priceless tetrahedron—and is being worshiped as a sex-symbol by women.

MY NEXT companion was Dr. Narasimachar. The gamma-forms were eating his nerve tissue now. Most of the time he was twisting and moaning in an agony the nurses couldn't relieve, or howling in delirium, but sometimes he was sane and calm enough to talk.

"You know, Hodian, I hate to go now," he told me during one long midnight interlude. "Just before the world ends. I'd rather be the last man. Anyhow, I'd like to live long enough to see where we went wrong."

Drowsily, I pondered that.

"I was a research man," he said. "I never cared much for individual people—you learned not to in the Indian cities where I grew up. But I did have rather large ideals. That's why I tackled the space diseases. We had to conquer them, I thought, before we could hope to make friends with our neighbor biocosms. Now I guess we'll never win."

He sighed and fell silent. I lay contemplating Spike Ballou and his tale of Guy's kingdom of women, who were somehow protected by the moon jewel from both space creatures and space diseases. The whole story seemed too complex and improbable to bear retelling to a dying man, so I said nothing.

"I've always been an optimist," Narasimachar went on suddenly. "I believed in science. I hoped it would show us our world and our nature. I tried to make it a bridge that we could follow, from the animals we are to the gods we could be."

I heard him move and felt his tormented eyes on me in the dark.

"Hodian, do you think I was wrong?"

I had to say I didn't know.

By morning he was frothing and whimpering again. Two days later he died. Andy Elving came in to pull the sheets over his face and draw the screen around his bed, but nobody took him away. Sometimes I heard feet and thumps and whispers in the corridor, but nobody answered my buzzer.

The screen blocked my view of the window, but for a time I could hear sounds in the street. The drum of fast traffic. An angry blare of horns. Now and again, squealing tires and the crash of a collision. These noises ebbed and finally ceased.

By afternoon the silence was stifling. I strained to hear the clink of a dish, the echo of a footstep, a voice on the street, for any sound at all. All I could hear, with my head on the pillow, was the slow throb of my own blood.

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Before nightfall, Narasimachar had begun to smell. Not, however, with any odor of human decay, but with the sour and overpowering scent of the gamma-life which had consumed him, a scent like a mashed beetle.

Goaded by that odor, by hot thirst and cold terror, I struggled out of bed that night. Giddy with weakness, clutching at chairs and the wall, I swayed around that blocking screen and reached the window.

Outside, a full moon shone on a sea of snowy fog. It lay flat across the river valley and covered most of the town. Here, on the low hill where the hospital stood, the tops of trees and the roofs of a few drowned houses stood dark above it. Covering the first floor of the hospital, the fog came nearly to my window ledge.

Far away across it, faint lights twinkled on the black hills where I suppose the refugees were camped. Though no wind stirred the trees, that vast white lake was alive with lazy waves whose slow rise and fall became almost hypnotic. Cold as the moon, serenely soundless, it shone with an unearthly loveliness that almost invited me to jump.

FATALITY

XVIII

ANDY ELVING woke me next morning out of a long nightmare in which a sweet high voice like the baby Kyrie's kept enticing me to dive into that snowy fog. I found myself where I must have fallen inside the window. Along with all the familiar discomforts of my gamma-form infection, I was bruised and chilled, too numb to move.

Elving wore a mask against the overwhelming beetle reek of Dr. Narasimachar's corpse. Pale and grim beneath it, he made no effort to speak, but moved with methodic calm, hauling me into a wheelchair and pushing me down the empty corridors and ramps out to the hospital parking lot. It was deserted except for an abandoned funeral coach that must have come for the dead doctor.

My stiffened limbs jerked with shock when I met the fog. Its odor struck me first—a heavy rancid scent that made me think of overripe muskmelons rotting in a garbage can. Then I saw it through a screen of trees—a gray uneven sea that heaved and billowed as if agitated by more wind than I could feel.

Its surface layers, darkened to a leaden color, were shredded into tattered, crawling wisps, as if somehow dissolved by sunlight. Its level had sunk perhaps a dozen yards, leaving the hospital on a low island rimmed with a red, slick-looking residue where its deeper layers had lain.

Beneath those writhing tongues

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its depths were still milk-white, opaque as ever. Lapping over the roofs below the row of trees, the dull flood filled the valley and still covered most of the city. A forlorn little group of buildings in the business district rose out of it, the tallest topped with a sign somehow still flashing: PITMAN TRUST.

"A bad night, Mr. Kim." Elving had torn off his white mask when we came into the open. "Sorry I couldn't get you out yesterday, but I was trying to save a few of my roses." He was loading me out of the wheelchair into the long black hearse and I saw a stack of his rose bushes already there, neatly bagged in burlap. "The militia had warned us, but the fog came in faster than anybody thought. I spent the night on the hospital roof."

I felt a pang of dismay when I learned that the motor keys were missing, but Andy Elving had been an astro-engineer. He lifted the hood and started the motor with a pair of pliers. I watched with a little more hope as he got under the wheel and drove us off the parking lot.

The fog surrounded us. He tried one street and then another, turning back when the pavement dipped below that restless sea. Everything was covered on three sides of us. Southward, however, the ground was higher. At last we found one residential street where dripping trees and soiled roofs marked out a hazardous lane through the fogginess.

Elving stopped the hearse above that street to study the crawling tongues of mist that still intermittently hid the red-slimed pavement. Stolidly calm, he pulled a plug of tobacco out of his hip pocket and bit off the end of it.

"A filthy habit," he muttered absently. "Picked it up on the moon. We couldn't smoke in the spacecraft."

He sat there some thirty minutes, chewing steadily, spitting unobtrusively, watching those tossing rags of fog. At last he expelled his wad into the street, closed the window, gripped the wheel.

"Hang on, Mr. Kim," he called to me. "The stuff has gone down as far as it's going to. I guess it's now or never for us."

Too weak to hang on, I dropped flat. The trucklike hearse lurched down the street. Gray tongues licked at the windows. Suddenly everything was white. Elving sat hunched and rigid, driving blind.

We hit something. The hearse lurched and quivered with the impact. Above the whine of the racing motor I thought I heard another sound—a thin fading wail, like the cry of some small creature in pain.

Perhaps the echo simply lurked in my excited imagination, for the hearse was skidding, the tires

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screeching on the unseen pavement with a far louder scream. Elving grunted and struggled at the wheel. We jolted against the hidden curb, and that rancid muskmelon odor was suddenly nauseating. But the hearse roared on till I saw blue sky.

Elving stopped a mile up the street. He rolled down the window, mopped his calm brown face and bit off more tobacco.

"Well, Mr. Kim." He looked around at me almost casually. "What now?"

"I think I know a place where the fog and the ants won't come. A place where nobody gets the space diseases."

I told him briefly about Spike Ballou and the Moon King.

"I've heard that yarn." He frowned in disbelief. "These times you can hear anything."

"But I know the moon children. Guy Hood is my nephew. I've seen the object they call the moon jewel. I believe the story's true. I'd like to see Guy again if we can get to Fairfax."

"My son was married there." He squinted deliberately at the fuel gauge and turned to peer at the uneasy sea behind us. "Just a couple hundred miles. Travel ain't as easy as it used to be—but why not?" A shrug announced his decision. "I guess we've nowhere else to go."

THE land was empty for a good many miles. We stopped two or three times to investigate abandoned vehicles. Elving loaded spare cans of fuel from one of them and lugged a case of dehydrated beef and a plastic bag of water from another.

A militia roadblock stopped us at the crest of a long hill. Three hollow-eyed young boys manned it.

They stabbed bayonets into the pile of rose bushes and asked nervous questions. When Elving told them about my gamma-form infection they stepped quickly back and waved us on.

For miles we drove beside refugee camps. Rocky hills were covered with tents and parked vehicles. Stragglers were still on the road and once a militia convoy held us up, crossing ahead of us with water tanks and trucks of crated food.

An enormous crowd swarmed around an open-air tabernacle on one hilltop, so near the road that I caught snatches of a hymn brayed from a speaker system and phrases from a screaming preacher warning his congregation to prepare itself for the end of the world. It had never seemed so near.

Dusty militiamen at a second roadblock told us that snakes had been reported nesting in the higher hills ahead, but Elving refused to believe it. This whole region, he thought, was too low and humid for the snakes. When he

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warned the men about my space disease they let us drive on.

We met no snakes. Those bare hills were vacant until we saw a half-dressed girl standing by the road, waving us to a stop. Elving slowed the hearse, but suddenly speeded again. Hidden men sprang out of the weeds as we went by and glass fragments sprayed me from sudden holes in our rear windows.

Out of range, Elving stopped to look for damage. When he found nothing serious he opened a tin of dried meat and offered to share it with me. All I wanted was water, but he ate with evident relish and washed his dentures carefully before we went on.

Beyond these hills the road fell into another wide valley. To my relief, there was no fog. We drove through miles of weed-grown farmland and then across an oddly empty space ridged here and there with mounds of broken brick that looked as dead as Babylon.

"Transplanet City." Elving nodded at the red mounds. "Transplanet Chemical was located here. The main industrial center in these parts. Till the ants came."

The ants had removed the old metal bridges. We had to leave the pavement and jolt down a rocky detour to a log trestle the militia must have built. The road beyond climbed again into barren rises that seemed vacant until hammering bullets dusted me once more with broken glass.

A tire was punctured, too, but we kept going long enough to outrun three ragged gunmen who chased us in an old farm tractor. Elving fixed the tire where we stopped that night, in a clump of trees behind a burned and looted country store. He slept a little while I sat up to watch. We went on at dawn.

That day we crossed grassy highlands that must have held cattle ranches, though I saw nothing larger than a frightened rabbit. In late afternoon we reached a level prairie that sloped gently toward a dark shadow along the horizon.

"Yonder's Fairfax." Elving had stopped to check the tires and to do what he could for me. "Just beyond that ridge—it's the old Greenway park." He rolled the tobacco in his jaw thoughtfully. "Fairfax could offer us a problem. I don't say this Moon King ain't your nephew. But how do you aim to identify yourself?"

Set against all the other hazards we had faced, the question seemed at first trivial, yet I found no easy answer. We were men. Guy's women, expecting no friends, would probably shoot without warning. Andy Elving shrugged and drove silently on before I could think of any reasonable solution.

We passed abandoned farms, fields unplowed and buildings burned, and crossed another strip of pastureland where no cattle

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grazed. Abruptly, near the ridge head, Elving stopped the hearse and climbed out to inspect the pavement.

"Cleat tracks," he muttered. "Your brother's tank."

SITTING up to look, I saw the double scar the tank had made, wallowing across a muddy field toward the woods. Elving grunted and pointed, and I discovered the tank itself parked beneath a tree, sloppily camouflaged with a few broken branches. A bullet slapped the top of the hearse and whined away.

"Your friend Spike Ballou." Elving slid under the wheel. He nodded toward a group of horsemen riding out of the trees beyond the tank. "I'd rather not meet them."

They rode hard to intercept us, but the hearse was faster. We lost sight of them as the road wound into the wooded ridges beyond the tank. In happier times this had been a pleasant recreation spot. It was now an empty buffer zone around Guy's kingdom. We plowed through the frost-seared weeds and vines that clotted the unused pavement, detoured the burned-out vehicles and felled trees that blocked it. Elving braked to a quick stop at last, where a bridge was gone.

The gap was only thirty feet, but we found no way across it. That final frustration was almost too much for me on top of all my fatigue and pain, but Elving was quietly hopeful that Guy's girls would reach us ahead of Ballou's men.

Patiently he went to work on a signal. My name, we decided, was our best password. Mixing motor oil with charcoal from the burned bridge, he set about printing it on a sheet.

Amid the space war's madness that spot was a paradoxical island of peace, sweet with the cool natural odors of terrestrial life and decay. Clear water gurgled over the pebbles. The frost had not touched the blue morning-glories still shining in the deeper shadows. A jay scolded Elving as he stretched our sign from a tree. Somewhere a woodpecker drummed.

We waited. I must have been dozing. I sensed a sudden stillness, then a clatter of hoofs on the pavement behind us. That sound stopped. There was only the murmur of the stream until I heard my brother's voice.

"Now hold your cool."

He stepped from behind a screen of morning-glories, a rifle in his hand. As fat as ever, he moved with surprising agility. His shapeless coveralls were stiff with grease, perhaps from the tank. A filthy brimless hat crowned his dark Levantine head like a fez.

"Well, Kimmie. I thought you were dead—and you don't look good." His slow drawl reflected

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neither pleasure nor surprise. He stopped outside the bullet-shattered window after a wary glance at Elving. "What are you doing here?"

"We're refugees." I nodded at Elving. "From the fog over Pitman. We're looking for Guy."

"You'll be sorry if you find him." His soiled face opened in a grin as if to some gloating recollection. "I don't think you'll ever see him. His women don't like us human men. But I'm in a position to persuade Ballou to let you try—if you'll carry a message for us."

I waited.

"A message from Captain Spike Ballou." Tom fumbled the crumpled butt of a narcorette out of his pocket. With no light for it, he sprinkled the last blue grains into his grimy palm, sniffed them into his nostrils and sprayed me with a sneeze.

"A message to the women—we figure Guy is sleeping now." A slow grin of dull joy had spread over his bloated face. He closed his glassy eyes and we waited while he snuffed his dripping nose two or three times with a kind of concentrated greed to save the precious juice.

"Tell them Ballou wants the Moon King," he panted. "Tell them to let us at him before he wakes up. If they'll agree to that we'll promise to be tender-hearted. Ballou says he'll let Billie Fran come back and take what's coming. But if they won't agree—" He leaned through the broken window and I caught pungent narcotic fumes mixed with his own stale goatishness. "If they won't play our game, we won't stop with just taking care of Guy." A smothered violence burst into his voice. "We'll slaughter all his bastard brats—and every slut that's pregnant by him. Tell 'em that!"

I shrank from a spray of acrid spittle.

"If they don't fall for that one—and I don't think they will—here's another offer you can pass along." He chuckled thickly, leaning too close to the broken glass. "This one is from me personally." He lowered his voice. "You know I wouldn't hurt Guy. My own dear son." He winked at me slyly. "I sure don't want his women—no man will ever please them now. All I want is the moon jewel—that lump of grit he put together. Tell Billie Fran to slip me that and I'll guarantee that Spike Ballou will never trouble her again. Personally—my pleasure."

I wiped my face and asked what good the nexode would be to him.

"Still a *schlemiel*." His tone and sardonic shrug might have been our father's. "Kimmie, that crazy crystal is the only thing worth wanting in this insane world. It's knowledge—when you learn how to use it. It's power—look what Guy does with it. It's safety—from

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the fog and the snakes and the space diseases. What good is the moon jewel?" He slapped his greasy leg and chortled. "Anyhow, Kimmie, here's our proposition." Grave again, he waved his rifle for emphasis. "We'll put you across the creek. Give the women a choice if you get a chance to talk. Tell them to give up their king or the jewel. Give them till sundown. Tell 'em we're coming in tonight with something they can't stop if they balk. You'll do that?"

I LOOKED at Andy Elving. He shrugged in noncommittal acceptance. Tom made us back the coach and put us on a gravel side road that took us down to a shallow ford and back to the pavement beyond the stream.

"I don't care for your brother," Elving muttered. "In fact, I wouldn't claim him."

He drove slowly, tooting the horn. Once we stopped to wait at an old park-service campsite, but nobody came out from among the trees. He gnawed off another chew and our hearse lurched on. Before we got back to the pavement a pile of rocks stopped us. A little beyond them a heavy chain was strung between two trees to bar the narrow road.

Elving tried the horn again. When nobody answered he climbed over the chain and vanished beyond the screen of vines. He was gone a long time. I lay in a feverish doze, listening to the wind above the trees and a dove cooing softly far away until voices aroused me. When I propped myself up, Elving was coming back, walking modestly in front of two girl guards, each uniformed in a single wide green garter and a singular aura of vibrant joy.

A short redhead with a rusty old double-barreled shotgun, the cracked stock bound with black tape. A slim long-haired dark girl with a bright-tined pitchfork. Aglow all over with the pure spirit of youth, they handled their weapons with a playful gaiety that alarmed me.

"Here they are, Mr. Kim." Elving had to look at them now and their vital beauty crinkled his brown face into an expression of reluctant admiration. "But they can't quite believe who you are."

"Sir?" The redhead bent to inspect me doubtfully through the shattered glass. "Honest, are you really Mr. Hodian?"

"Guy's *Tio* Kim?" The dark girl had a soft Spanish accent that made me Keem. "From Skygate?"

The redhead laughed with sheer delight when I nodded.

"It's just too grand to be true. One night Guy told me a lot about you. How you helped him learn to talk. How you were good to him when he was still too young to help himself and how you cared for him when other people hurt him. He

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said he was afraid you were dead. He'll be so glad you came!"

"Maybe *si*, maybe *no*." The dark girl shrugged to toss the sleek black mane from her face. "If you are Guy's *Tio* Keem, I think you better prove it. Tell us facts about him."

"You knew Guy when he was tiny?" The eager redhead widened immense blue eyes. "I bet he was cute as a baby."

"Not really," I said. "The beautiful moon children were Kyrie Thorsen and Nick Marko—"

She looked disappointed and the dark girl scowled.

"Who? Who you say?"

I discovered then that they knew very little about Guy's actual past. Though he had told them something about his father and me, apparently his total rejection of Nick and Kyrie had caused him to deny that he had ever been one of the famous Moon Kids. The girl guards apparently believed him.

"Maybe you lie." The dark girl stabbed her pitchfork into the sod and bent so close that I caught the clean fragrance of her glossy hair. "Guy's own *bandido* father try to rob him. Maybe he send you to try again."

Weak and sweating with alarm, I looked at Andy Elving. He was chewing steadily and his broad stoic face gave me nerve to go on.

"We're refugees," I said. "We're running from the space invaders and our own fellow men. We need Guy's help. I think he'll let us stay here if you'll just take us to him."

"I'm sure you'll be welcome—"

"Meester, you better make no fonny business." The dark girl cut off the redhead. "Maybe you don't tell us everything." Her jet eyes squinted with suspicion. "Who show you where to cross the river?"

"We did meet Guy's father." I nodded uncomfortably. "He gave us a message from Mr. Ballou to take to Guy's women." I caught an uneasy breath. "Will you let us deliver the message?"

The dark girl was clearly in command. She frowned thoughtfully at the redhead and sharply back at Elving and me.

"We give you a choice," she decided at last. "We let you turn around and go back now. Tell Ballou and Guy's *bandido* father the mothers want no message from them. Or else we take you to the mothers—"

"Take us," I said.

"The mothers have Guy's children." She shook her head, with a hard look at Elving and me. "They share the power of the jewel—enough to know fonny business. Maybe they say you both okay. But maybe they see you not okay and keel you."

I turned to Elving. He spat delicately away from the girls, in the general direction of my brother and Spike Ballou.

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"No choice," he muttered. "If it's the mothers or the fog, we'll take the mothers."

XIX

THE redhead clapped her hands. "I think you're both okay," she said happily. "I just know the mothers will let you wait for Guy. You'll have to wait because he's sleeping now. He'll sleep for two or three days and his sleeping place is secret. Only the mothers know—"

"Shhh!" The dark girl hissed at her. "Lib, I think you talk too much." She pointed the pitchfork at us. "Maybe they work for Guy's *bandido* father. Maybe they come to spy out his sleeping place. We wait for the mothers to say."

"We wouldn't hurt Guy," I told her. "He used to be fond of me and I believe he'll want to help us now. He always was a strange creature, but I believe he means to be good—"

"He's grand." Lib swelled with pure happiness. "Just too grand." Her bubbling eagerness moved her closer to the hearse. "If you knew him always—tell us how he used to be."

Wondering how much to tell, I looked at the dark girl.

"Say what you like." She flung back her veil of hair, with a gesture of spectacular indifference. "The mothers will decide."

"Thank you, Eva." Lib beamed breathlessly at me. "I want to know about Guy when he was a baby."

"He wasn't a pretty baby," I began uncertainly. "Though I did learn to love him, it wasn't easy. He always seemed—well, more animal than human."

"He's more than human now." Devotion rounded her enormous eyes. "In every way there is."

"Perhaps he has changed since I knew him." Their absolute worship had begun to puzzle me. "I can't quite understand how much you seem to care for him."

"My father used to speak of heaven when he prayed," Eva said. "He lived on *frijoles* and died fighting weeds in another man's field. But Guy—"she caught her breath and I saw the dark blaze of passion in her eyes—"Guy makes a little heaven here."

"Look at me." Lib preened herself, lifting her pink-nippled breasts by raising her arms and combing the fingers of both hands through her flame-colored hair. "Before Guy came I was a miserable thing." She made a fetching face at what she had been. "Bad skin. Ugly freckles. Stooped shoulders and dry hair and crooked teeth. Allergies the doctors couldn't cure. And I was afraid of men. Just one date was all I ever had. A pimply grocery clerk wanted to walk me to a church supper. When he came to pick me up I got sick to my stomach. I vomited

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right in front of him." Shaking off that depressing recollection, she glowed again. "Guy does more for me."

"Maybe you like to look at me." Eva arched her tawny torso as if to challenge Lib. "Guy makes heaven for all of us. Maybe you like to know what he did for me. You know Spike Ballou?"

She waited for my nod.

"Before Guy came Ballou found me waiting on tables in a helibar and picked me to be what he call a Poppy-Cola girl. I was supposed to be on trivee to sell Poppy-Cola, but he wanted to have sex all the time—at the conventions of Poppy-Cola salesmen, up in his helicabin and even on the sofa in his private office. Most of the time he was too drunk, but he did get me pregnant. When his wife found out he let me go. With an EZ-Abort gun and a fifty-dollar bonus. I got another job waiting on tables at the Red Raven—and he wouldn't even look at me when he came in." She spat on the ground. "Guy's better."

Her luminuous eyes narrowed warily at me.

"Maybe now you see why we watch the border." She gestured at the chain across the road. "Guy makes a small heaven here, but it's for women only. Men—they all want to kill Guy and steal his jewel."

"Men don't like Guy." Lib nodded, as if with a passing regret. "Take our Presbyterian pastor. I used to adore him before Guy came. Such a refined, handsome, godly man. His voice when he prayed used to give me goose-pimples. But he joined Spike Ballou—I can't imagine why." She tossed her fiery curls. "He slipped across the river on an old gray mule and found his wife in the barn milking the cow. He prayed over her till he got her convinced that Guy was the devil incarnate. He made her hide him in the house and help him spy around till he found where Guy was sleeping with the jewel."

"If you plan such tricks as that" Eva waved her pitchfork with a feline ferocity—"*adiós!*"

"The pastor's wife had come to her senses by then," Lib went on, "but he tied her up and broke into Guy's hiding place. If you can imagine a minister—he stabbed Guy and grabbed the jewel and tried to get away." Merriment began to ripple in her voice. "Guy's as hard to wake as he is to hurt, but the pastor pulled a boner. He left the knife sticking in him. That bothered Guy so much he awoke long enough to call the mothers. They sent a squad of us maiden guards to catch the pastor. It was the middle of a dead-black night, but we could see the shine of the jewel. He had it in a sack, but somehow it lit him up—and even the mule. We caught up with him right about there." She nodded at

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the rocks in the road. "I sort of hated to hurt him, but we've got to defend Guy's country."

She slapped at a fly crawling down her firm pink flank.

"We hanged the pastor from a liveoak tree. Next day the mothers tied his body on the old gray mule and let it wander back across the river as a warning for men to keep out. I don't know why, but they just can't learn."

Very briefly troubled, she frowned toward the road behind us.

"Just last month, Ballou and his raiders carried off Billie Fran—she's the first mother. They hurt her terribly, trying to make her tell where Guy sleeps now and where we keep the jewel. But she finally found a knife and fought Ballou and got away."

"Maybe you see now why we don't like men." Eva leveled the long-tined pitchfork into my face. "Maybe now you change your mind. Maybe you go back to Spike Ballou."

Elving turned carefully to spit aside.

"We'll take our chances here." He glanced gravely at me. "I told you Mr. Hodian is sick. He's had a long fight with a gamma-form infection. You can see he's not able to hurt anybody."

Both girls peered at me. Eva's eyes narrowed doubtfully, but Lib's grew round with sympathy.

"You do look awfully pale and bad," she said. "But you'll feel better fast if the mothers let you stay. Fairfax is a healthy place since Guy came. A happy place, too—for women, anyhow. Our lady doctors can't understand just how the jewel works, now that we keep it locked up—"

"Careful, Lib."

"He's no spy." Squealing at Eva in a flash of resentment, Lib turned pinker all over. "But we do have to defend Guy's country." She smiled soothingly at me. "We have to guard the jewel because it really is wonderful. Look what it did for my Grandma Bloodworth."

Lib turned her graceful back on Eva, who was stirring restively.

"Ninety-two years old, the day she first saw Guy. Dying in a rest home. He didn't even touch her then or let her see the jewel, but she got well. Her fractured hip knitted. Her cancer went away. Her weak heart got strong again. She moved out of the rest home and back to the farm. Now—"

Lib turned to giggle at Eva.

"Guy likes music—a queer sort of music we never heard before. He's been teaching some of us to play it. Eva used to be the best. But Grandma Bloodworth is his favorite fiddler now. And I think she's pregnant again."

"Who isn't?" Eva snapped, but in a moment she was reflecting Lib's happy adoration. "I told you Guy makes a little heaven here.

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The mothers say even the weather has changed since he learned to work the jewel. Maybe they're right. The rain seems to come when it should and the hail and the frost don't come when they shouldn't."

I sat wondering vaguely what sort of unexplained interface might have been established between the forces of the atmosphere and the unknown energies of that ultimate artifact from the stars. Elving spat deliberately and spoke to Eva. "Will you take us to the mothers now?"

"Your choice." She shrugged with the lazy grace of a bored tigress. "Maybe you'll be sorry."

WITH an effortless strength that amazed me the girls rolled two big stones out of the ruts ahead. Eva removed a padlock to lower the chain. I settled gratefully back against my pillows and the hearse lurched ahead.

When the rocks and the chain had been replaced Eva searched the hearse for weapons and slid cautiously into the rear, her pitchfork ready at our backs. Lib perched on the front fender, bright hair blowing, beckoning casually with the old shotgun to guide us.

We were soon on the pavement. As Elving drove on toward Fairfax it seemed to me that we had entered a phenomenal circle of joyous and abounding life. Early frosts had already browned the arid uplands we had crossed beyond the river, but here we came out of the trees into a lush green landscape.

Lib beckoned us to stop beside a gnarled old tree, where sprays of young leaves and white blooms shaded ripe red apples. A mockingbird in the tree kept on trilling while she picked huge apples and tossed them into the hearse. I bit into one of them when Eva handed it to me. Even though I had no appetite, its sweet juice made my saliva run.

Gravely weighing the apple in his hand, Elving leaned slowly to spit his cud into the dust and impulsively tossed his gnawed plug after it. Munching the apple, he drove impassively on.

But that time I was sitting up again, feeling unexpectedly refreshed and sharing Lib's bright delight in the exuberant life around us. Gaily waving the old shotgun, she pointed to a covey of quarter-grown quail running beside the road as if it would be spring forever. She smiled at a suckling calf with a black-spotted cow, laughed at a sorrel colt frisking across a green alfalfa field, clapped at a black stallion mounting a mare.

Though Ballou and his raiders had managed to burn most of the buildings near the river, we were soon rolling through an unscarred zone where dairy cattle grazed near white-painted barns and half-clad women sang as they tended the

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fertile soil. A young girl and a dog watched a flock of white sheep. Red-painted combines were crawling across fields of ripe wheat. We overtook two women on a wagon loaded with full bags of grain.

In contrast to all the waste and chaos we had left beyond the river, Fairfax itself was a welcome island of peace. The streets were clean. Naked children scampered about a school playground. When we passed a bakery, the smell of new bread set my mouth to watering again.

A little group of women on horseback met us near the courthouse square. They carried haphazard weapons—a police pistol, a hunting knife, a hatchet, a slung deer gun. Their leader was a tall, attractively sun-browned girl with long yellow hair and a bright ironic face. She had a shortbow slung behind her and a tiny child in her arms.

Lib gestured us to a halt and Eva ran ahead to speak to the women. After a few moments the yellow-haired girl dismounted and they came back to the hearse together. I saw long welts across the girl's back, not fully healed, and ugly blue marks at her wrists and ankles.

"The first mother," Eva was crisply respectful. "Mother Billie Fran Hood. She'll decide about you."

"So you are Guy's favorite uncle?" Her pleasant voice had a slight, childish lisp. She paused to catch some murmured word from Lib and a quick concern changed her tone. "Eva says you've been ill." She peered into the hearse and I watched her doubts dissolve. "You do look bad. I think you need the jewel's power. If Guy wants you—" At last she nodded, slowly smiling. "Eva will find a place for you to wait till he wakes up."

"We have a message," Elving reminded me uneasily.

"We talked to my brother back at the river," I said. "A man who calls himself Todhunter Hoke—"

Her blaze of fury checked me.

"Go on," she snapped. "What's the message?"

"Spike wants Guy," I said. "My brother wants the moon jewel. They're demanding that you give up one or the other before sundown. If you refuse, they're coming in with an army tank. They're threatening to kill all Guy's children—"

"Let 'em come." Her scarred arms tightened on the lively golden infant, who was peering at me as brightly as another baby Kyrie. Her smile turned defiant. "They've been here before. If they come back they'll get another lesson."

Calm again, she paused to bounce her alert wide-eyed child. Elving had turned to listen, frowning. Though I had noticed no sound except the ring of fever in

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my ears, he said he could hear the rumble of the tank crawling toward us over the ridge. I wasn't sure anything could stop it.

XX

LIB and Eva escorted us to the Fairfax Manor. Twelve stories tall, it overlooked the courthouse square. The lights flickered now and then, as the women had some minor difficulty with the stand-by generators, but we had no other grounds for complaint. With Lib and Eva standing guard, we were fed abundantly and put into the penthouse suite to wait for Guy's awakening.

In spite of the impending attack, I felt relaxed and oddly happy. Though I hadn't seen the tetrahedron, I believe some obscure effect from it had begun to help my body overcome that old space infection. Whatever the cause, my pain had gone. My head was clear. Once more I enjoyed eating. I even found a certain delight in contemplating Guy's girls and the radiance they wore. That night I slept well.

A thudding concussion woke me before dawn. The windows shook. Somewhere a woman screamed. The roar of Spike Ballou's tank was unmistakeable now and I knew it was firing into Fairfax. I shouted anxiously to find Elving.

"Out here, Mr. Kim." His calm voice came from the terrace. "I think the women are attack—huh?"

A startled gasp cut off his reply. Grateful for a sense of health I had not felt in two years, I left the bed to join him. Yellow flames exploded out of a shattered building at the street corner across the square. Women ran around the corner dragging a hose, but suddenly dropped flat.

White fire geysered out of a new crater in the pavement near them, where another incendiary shell had fallen. Glass shattered, the floor quivered and shell fragments whined. Stumbling toward the parapet, I stopped to stare at Elving. He wasn't watching the action in the street. His eyes were lifted to the moonlit sky.

"What—" For the first time in my experience, his voice shook with amazement. "What unholy thing is that?"

Dread blew cold on the back of my neck when I saw what he was watching. A silver globe brighter than the moon, it dropped out of the sky, veered away from the dark courthouse, hovered over the blazing building at the corner. Elving watched it for what seemed a long time before he turned slowly to me.

"I'm a plain man, Mr. Kim," he whispered hoarsely. "I always done my little bit, here or on the moon. I think I've earned a few quiet years. All I wanted now was time to grow my roses. I thought

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we had found the place to do it here."

Sobs broke his voice.

"I—I don't like them flying snakes, Mr. Kim. Or the metal ants or the killer fog or all the space diseases. Now here—here's this thing in the sky. At first I thought—thought I was outa my mind. But it ain't me. It's the whole world gone wrong, Mr. Kim."

He clung to me, shuddering.

Down in the street, the women had vanished. That bright sphere dropped again, as if to observe the abandoned firehose where it writhed like a broken snake on the pavement, jetting water at random. The globe hovered as if to inspect the towering flame, then drifted slowly upward.

At about our level it slowed again and wheeled over the courthouse in a curiously hesitant way, as if somehow hunting. It came so near that I could see the pattern of its silver surface—a curious honeycomb of small hexagons.

Elving gasped and shook his fist, but it ignored us. I heard a faint shrilling as it went by, like the whine of the mechanical ants, and I caught a sharp sulphuric scent in the air. The ants, I thought, had somehow come to invade Guy's kingdom.

Not far from us the object paused. It hung still while another shell came wailing down to tear a new crater in the courthouse lawn. Abruptly it shot into the sky.

We saw no more of it, but I heard the tank again. Its engines roared briefly. Its cannon thudded rapidly a dozen times. Smaller arms crackled in the distance. But those sounds died. No more incendiaries fell into Fairfax.

Across the square the women returned to the hose. We watched until they had the blaze under control. Uneasily searching the sky, we saw only the pale moon setting and a pink dawn glowing. My wonder and alarm slowly ebbed into a sense of mystic peace and fitness I didn't try to understand. Sleepily serene, I went back to bed.

ELVING woke me at noon with news and food. A swarm of metal ants had attacked Ballou's tank and scattered his men. Guy was still asleep, his kingdom now secure. Elving himself had recovered his slow-spoken calm. Listening with a new tranquility, I cleaned every crumb from the tray and fell asleep again.

Next day I was up before Elving, feeling almost drunkenly well. We went down for breakfast with Billie Fran and our two green-gartered guards. When we had eaten, Elving drove us a few miles out of town in the hearse to see what the ants had done to the tank.

It had plowed through a hedge into a field of alfalfa. Its cleats had torn the dark earth, where it attempted to turn. Its fleeing

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crew had left footprints in a muddy ditch, but nothing else. We found no metal, no ants, not even a brimstone odor.

Elving drove us back slowly, looking for a spot where he could replant his roses. Ballou's men were scattered, Guy would soon be waking to greet us and we all felt secure in the shelter of the tetrahedron.

The space war seemed far away. Billie Fran sat beside me, aglow with the alluring new vitality that all Guy's women shared, happily dangling her little golden daughter. The child's likeness to the baby Kyrie still astonished me and I wondered if the moon grit had created Guy to father a superhuman race, destined to inherit the solar system, if not to open a way to the stars.

Those idle speculations were rudely cut short. As we parked the hearse beside the hotel the child screamed in sudden fright. Billie Fran gasped and snatched for her knife. Elving shouted in hoarse alarm. Something bright flashed overhead.

I heard a whine, caught a sulphur scent and saw a bright globe skimming past us. It paused across the street, above the massive cube of glass and granite that had housed the Fairfax National Bank, and came gently down outside the drive-in window.

A long panel of joined hexagons flexed and dropped to form a ramp. Two people stepped lightly down it, out of the shadowy ball. A man and a girl. Neither was clad, though the man carried a folded blanket over one arm. They looked very fair at first, but the sun washed them with glowing gold.

Nick and Kyrie!

Dazed, I could hardly breathe. I had not expected to see them again and their arrival here was as unbelievable to me as their vehicle itself. I ran to meet them, stumbled over the curb and reeled to a halt in the street—not yet as strong as I had felt.

"Uncle Kim!"

Illuminated with joy, Kyrie darted to hug me. Nick gave me a vigorous hand. I stood gaping, because they had changed. Both stood taller. No longer the skinny, big-eyed, troubled child, Nick was poised and confident, a golden god.

Kyrie—I looked at her with an ache of delight. Long ago a woman, she had grown into a goddess. Yet what touched me was not her lean, high-breasted perfection. Kyrie loved me. The light in her eyes filled my own with tears.

"What's wrong, Uncle Kim?" Her lilac scent enveloped me and her dear voice was a warm caress. "Have you been sick?"

"I'm all right now," I told her. "Now that you are here."

WHEN I looked around for Elving and Billie Fran I

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found the street empty behind me. They had fled into the hotel. I turned back and saw a thing that jolted my senses.

Behind Nick and Kyrie the edge of that flexible ramp had frayed into darting fragments. The fragments were ants. A stream of them came whining toward us through the air. Kyrie held out her hand and one alighted on it.

The whole globe, I now discovered, was made of ants. Sealed into a honeycomb pattern, their bright hexagonal heads formed all its outer surface. Their sleek black tail balls made the inner one. Interlaced limbs knitted them together.

"Ants!" I swayed backward. "Are you—prisoners?"

"If you could see yourself!" Kyrie gurgled with delight. "These are ours." She smiled fondly down at the thing in her hand. "I suppose they are a little like ants, but Nick calls them replicating machines."

She was trying to hand the whining thing to me.

"It won't bite you, Uncle Kim." She laughed at my alarm. "Actually it won't harm anybody."

To my relief, Nick waved it away.

"Kyrie found the design recorded in the nexode." He spoke with a brisk assurance. "After COSMOS had come apart. We built the first units at the shop on the mesa. They do reproduce themselves in underground centers, somewhat like insects. But really they are only tools. We used them to build the tachyon terminal."

I couldn't quite grasp that until the saga of Clayton Carter began to emerge from the fading nightmare of my long confinement in the Pitman hospital.

"It's already—already built?" Staring at that bright ball of ants, I shuddered in spite of myself. "I knew a man," I whispered, "a spaceplane pilot, forced down near Skygate. He nearly died getting out of the desert. In the hospital he was out of his head. He talked about watching the ants at work on the terminal tower until they frightened him away. But I was afraid to believe—"

"It's there," Kyrie told me. "Ten miles high."

Awed, I could only nod.

"Too bad your friend lost his nerve," she added. "Nick's parents and my mother have been gathering a little colony of refugees. They hoped for a long time that you would turn up."

"The starships?" Wonder caught my throat. "Have the starships begun to come?"

Suddenly troubled, Kyrie shook her head.

"The terminal's complete, but not yet operational." Nick frowned, too. "We haven't got the beacon going. It turns out that we must have the nexode to modu-

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late the tachyon signal. We've failed to find a substitute. I thought the whole project was dead until Kyrie located the nexode here."

He nodded toward the bank building as if he already knew where Guy and his women kept the tetrahedron.

"You can't have the moon jewel." I was gasping. "Guy won't let you take it."

"It's bad, Uncle Kim." Kyrie's lips quivered. "I knew poor dear Guy would be hurt and I made Nick look for another way. But he says there simply isn't any other way. We've come to take the nexode—"

Her shivery whisper died. Lips parted, eyes black, she stared up the street. The golden glow drained out of her skin, leaving her a figure of frozen terror in white alabaster. She had seen Guy.

XXI

I HAD been vaguely aware of a flurry of footsteps and hushed voices behind us, but Guy was alone when I turned. He came down the middle of the silent street, walking with a sort of rolling swagger. Naked, he was as male and nearly as huge as a bull.

Though little taller than Nick or Kyrie, he must have weighed a good quarter-ton. The short glossy fur had turned black across his back and his massive shoulders, cream-colored over his great belly. His yellow eyes slitted warily as he drew near and his black-tipped ears cocked toward the ball of ants.

Their high-pitched song grew sharper. That black gangway rolled itself up and sealed itself neatly into the round bright honeycomb. The globe rose a little, floated lightly forward, settled again near us, where it blocked Guy's path.

He roared. His belly-deep rattle was not loud, yet it chilled me even in that hot sunlight. It had the menace, I thought, of a starved lion challenged for his kill. Guy rolled on, unstopable as an avalanche.

Kyrie darted suddenly to meet him.

That savage rumble died. He stopped, trembling and breathing hard. As his red lips drew back, I saw that even his teeth had grown. He stood grinning down at Kyrie, long white fangs drooling saliva.

"Ky!" Nick cried out beside me, sharply. "Come back."

But she ran on.

"Dear Guy!" She laughed with evident delight. "How strong you've grown—"

He wrapped her in his bulging arms. She reached up to stroke his shoulders, tiptoed to kiss his sleek-furred cheek. He shuddered and whimpered and crushed her fiercely against him.

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"Guy, don't! You're hurting—"

He moaned and let her go. Growling, he glared at Nick. His yellow eyes blinked when he saw me. His ears cupped toward me. With a ferocious smile he shambled to meet me, extending a gigantic furry paw—it had grown great black claws, which now were safely sheathed.

"They told me you were here." His slow thick voice was almost as alarming as his roar. "I'm glad, Uncle Kim. You were always good to me. You're welcome here."

Snarling ominously, he swung back toward Nick.

"Shake hands!" Kyrie gasped. "Please—"

Gravely, Nick offered his hand. Guy made no move to take it. He swayed slowly back and forth, his narrowed eyes flickering between Nick and the globe of droning ants.

"Why did you come?" His voice was a modulated growl, barely intelligible. "What do you want?"

"I hope you can forgive us, Guy—" Nick began.

"Please!" Kyrie stopped him. "Let me talk to Guy."

Guy bristled his stiff gray neck-hair at Nick, flared his ears toward the strident globe, swung slowly back to Kyrie. His wide face twitched beneath the fur and tears welled out of his tawny eyes. Poised on the balls of his feet like a boxer, he bent his ears toward her.

"Guy—dear Guy!" Her low voice broke, but she gulped and went on. "Don't you know why we exist? The grit from the messenger missile had been lying millions of years on the moon, waiting for any intelligence to come and use it. It changed our fathers when they got there, so that we were born. We're here for a purpose. Can't you see that, Guy?

His only reply was to bounce slightly aside, as if evading a blow.

"You know why we were born." Her voice turned desperate. "We're to set up the transgalactic terminal, so the starships can come. That's all we're for."

His ears flicked toward the clustered ants.

"The starships will bring peace among the biocosms," she promised him. "The transgalactic culture will help us understand our neighbors and ourselves. It will stop the space war, Guy. It will end all our troubles with the snakes and the fog and the alien bioforms—"

"But, Ky, they don't bother us." Guy grumbled and erupted like a volcano finding a voice. "We've got a good place here, so we don't need the starships. I want Uncle Kim to stay. And you, Ky—" He uttered a low, hoarse sound, half sob and half moan. "I want you—so much it kills me, Ky." He shuddered and blinked and swung toward Nick like a boxer feinting. "Nick had better leave."

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"Please, Guy!" Pale and shaking, Kyrie clutched his arm. "You aren't as safe as you think. Not for long. We had to send the replicators—the ants—to stop a tank attack while you were asleep." He was ducking back, but she clung to his arm. "Guy, Guy! You've just got to understand."

He trembled and stood still, quivering ears lifted toward her.

"The star people sent the grit." Her high voice quavered and raced too fast for Guy, who stood shaking himself in a dull, bewildered way. "They knew young cultures often kill each other on contact—before they learn to understand one another. The grit was sent to help us save all our planets. But we've already made too many mistakes. If we don't get the terminal open soon, Guy—very soon—we'll all be dead."

"Get—away!" His great throat rattled. "Just leave me alone."

"We can't, Guy." Kyrie wet her pale lips. "We've got to have your help. You see, the replicators have the terminal almost done, but we can't light the beacon to guide the starships to earth without—without—"

She faltered and stopped, quivering with pain.

"We need the nexode, Guy." Nick's level voice was slow at first, clipped and intense. "Ky made me try everything else, but we can't energize the beacon without it." His words came faster and faster, as they always did when he was under stress. "I hope you'll try to be reasonable, Guy. Perhaps we won't need the nexode long. When the ships arrive with new equipment we should be able to return—"

"You always had everything." Guy drowned him, thundering like a rising hurricane. "You had brains. You had charm. You had a father and a mother. You had each other. You could talk and you stayed awake and you did things—"

"Guy, Guy!" Kyrie cried. "You know I always loved you—"

His ruthless paw swept her aside.

"You always took everything." He danced like a fighter at Nick, moving with surprising tigerish grace. "You took the jewel when I was slow to use it. You took Ky."

"No!" Kyrie sobbed. "Guy, you don't realize—"

"Now I do." His drumming boom cut her off. "I realize the jewel is mine. I made it. My father helped me take it. I need it. Now I mean to keep it. I won't give it up. Not for you, Uncle Kim." His yellow eyes blazed at me with a paralyzing power. "Not for Ky. Not for anybody."

THE street was quiet for a moment, except for Guy's harsh breathing and the shrilling of the ants. The hot air stirred around us and I caught a whiff of Guy's barnyard rankness.

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"This will hurt you, Guy." Nick was brisk and cool. "It will hurt Ky, too. I don't like it, either, but you've left us no alternative. We've come for the nexode. We're going to take it."

Guy crouched toward him like some great cat.

"Ky has located it here in the bank vault. The replicators won't take long to dig it out. We don't intend to hurt you, Guy. I hope you won't attempt to interfere—"

Guy charged.

"Stop it!" Kyrie screamed. "If you love me—"

Nick jumped back. Though I observed no signal, that bright ball exploded into individual ants. Whining like hornets, they swarmed around Guy. Their sulphuric reek burned my eyes.

Bellowing, Guy plowed into the swarm. Ants dived at him. The bright sun dimmed, as they sucked at his energy. I staggered back, numb and shuddering from the sudden cold in my bones, sick with the bitterness in my mouth.

Guy bawled with rage and pain, but the ants failed to stop him. I never knew why. Perhaps some effect of the tetrahedron shielded him. Perhaps some effect of Kyrie's terror slowed the ants. More simply, I suppose, Nick couldn't kill Guy, while Guy knew no inhibiting compunctions.

His furious paws batted the ants away from his head. When Kyrie darted in he flung her aside. Cruel claws open, he caught Nick by the throat, shook him until I heard his neck snap, flailed at the flying ants with Nick's lax body, finally tossed it toward Kyrie's feet.

Nick jerked and lay still. Kyrie shrieked and dropped beside him. A stranger thing—the ants died. Their shrilling ceased. Their bodies clattered on the pavement, jangling like a shower of old clocks.

Suddenly the sun shone bright again. Beneath its heat the courthouse square lay hushed and desolate. Kyrie kneeled over Nick. His flat body looked small as a child's, its color slowly fading to a frightful whiteness. Guy towered over them, rocking back and forth like a groggy boxer. All I could hear was his rough breath and Kyrie's piteous sobs. Black bitterness lingered in my throat.

SWEAT ran down Guy's heaving body, painting uneven streaks in his pale ventral fur. His gamy musk clogged my nostrils. His panting breath was now accompanied by a broken vocal sound, a slow and meaningless moaning. He shook himself at last and bent slowly over Kyrie. Long claws sheathed, he fumbled at her quivering shoulder.

"Why, Kyrie? Why?" His moaning became a tormented voice. "You knew I couldn't give the moon jewel away. Why did you—"

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"Murderer!" She stiffened beneath his clumsy paw and her slashing shriek cut him off. "You stupid monster! You've murdered Nick. Murdered the terminal. Murdered the world."

Guy's ears drooped. He shook his great flat head in a dull, bewildered way, like a punch-drunk fighter. Reeling backward, he stumbled over one of the fallen ants, picked it up with an awkward paw, stood blinking at it blindly. With a stifled howl he hurled the dead machine against the granite wall of the bank and ran blundering up the street.

Andy Elving and Billie Fran had taken refuge in the hotel. They came back when Guy was gone. We carried Nick inside and called a doctor. She confirmed that he was dead. His neck was broken. His heart had stopped. His skull had caved in when Guy had slammed him against the pavement.

Intrigued by Nick's anatomy, the doctor wanted to do an autopsy. Kyrie objected wildly. She stayed beside Nick, I think with some desperate hope of his recovery. Recalling how often the children had baffled common human medicine, I shared that hope till it was gone.

When the body began to swell and decompose even Kyrie gave up. Elving had nailed a plain wooden coffin together, and we carried Nick to the Fairfax cemetery in our own hearse. Guy and a dozen of his women walked silently behind it.

We held no formal ceremony. The forms we knew seemed not to fit. I did breathe a prayer, however, to whatever powers might be concerned with the moon children and the survival of mankind and I saw several women kneeling. Guy and Kyrie stood bowed by the grave for a long time after it was filled, walked away hand in hand.

"—to show you're truly sorry," Kyrie was saying, as they came within my earshot. "You can bring the nexode and come with me back to the terminal. I don't know what we can do without Nick. But at least we can try to light the beacon."

Guy halted and she swung anxiously to face him.

"Now you're the silly one, Ky," he rumbled gently. "I don't like hurting you, but I can't leave Fairfax. Did you know I was happy here, Ky? For the first time ever. Because people needed me. Because they loved me as I am. They still do, Ky, even if I did kill Nick."

"But, Guy—"

"Anyhow, we can't get to Skygate." His rising growl drowned her protest. "It's too far. The fog is coming up the rivers and the snakes are on the mountains and men like my father are hunting other men. Sorry, Ky."

Sullen now, he stalked away. His silent women followed. Kyrie stood marble-white and marble-

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quiet, staring bleakly at the grave, until Elving and I urged her into the hearse.

We returned to the hotel. As we left the hearse she picked up one of the lifeless ants. She examined it with an air of absent and indifferent wonder, as if it had been perhaps the fossil skeleton of some long-extinct trilobite.

"Could you start the ants again?" A spark of hope had stirred me. "They could carry some of us back to Skygate, maybe with the nexode if Guy would ever let it go—"

"I can't, Uncle Kim." A cold finality dulled her voice, and she dropped the motionless machine. "Because they belonged to Nick. His brain controlled them through resonant interfaces with the nexode spectrum. In a way they were members of his own body. They all died with him."

We took her into the hotel. She wouldn't eat and she didn't want to talk. When we found her a room, she locked herself in. I didn't see her again for several days. And presently I found it queerly hard to remember her grief.

In spite of all the staggering impact of her tragedy, the nexode must have still been at work. Though the nature of its effect was still a riddle to me, I felt as if it were somehow radiating life and love and joy, bathing us all in an invisible ambiance of vital optimism.

IMMERSED in that atmosphere of blithe tranquility, Elving genially declared he never expected to need his tobacco again. He had found a bed for his roses in the city park. I spent two or three sunny afternoons with him there, watching him prepare the soil and sharing his pleased wonder at all the plants budding and blooming around us as if they were immune to winter.

Though Lib and Eva still escorted us, they were becoming more playmates than guards. Their petty tensions at the border had mellowed here into a sisterly affection and they had begun to smile at us so warmly that I was afraid Guy would be offended when he woke.

As for myself, I was still convalescent, eating well and sleeping most of the time, intoxicated with a joy of life I had once forgotten and no more concerned with the space war and the dead beacon than if they had been incidents in the history of another planet.

Relaxing in Guy's world, I had begun to feel that it might become a small heaven for Elving and me as well as for his women—until one night the weather changed.

The day before had been bright and fine. I had gone to bed in our penthouse suite with the windows open. A howling wind woke me at about midnight. Icy gusts whipped me as I tried to close the win-

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dows and my throat became choked with bitter dust. The storm had died when I woke again, but a hard glitter of frost had fallen over the city.

If Guy's kingdom had been a shielded oasis of eternal spring, some inexplicable thrust had shattered the shield. Reluctant to get out of bed, I thought I could feel that space infection aching again in my bones. Elving looked dull and depressed when he wandered in to go down to breakfast with me and he confessed that he hankered for a comforting chew of tobacco.

We found Lib alone on guard. Eva was in the hospital, she told us, after a sudden miscarriage. As wan and bleak as if she herself had been the patient, she doled out more tales of disaster while we were slowly discovering we had no appetite for breakfast after all.

The unexpected storm and frost had blighted crops all around Fairfax. Scores of young animals were mysteriously dying. A crazed stallion had thrown a twelve-year-old girl and trampled her to death. The mothers reported that Guy had been tossing and moaning all night in his sleep.

"We don't know what has gone wrong." Lib gnawed her bloodless lips. "Mother Billie Fran first thought perhaps the jewel had been stolen, but the mothers on guard say it's still in the vault. We're afraid it's somehow ruined or broken. The mothers say its light flickered and dimmed an hour before the storm hit." She shrugged dismally, hunched and shivering as if she needed more than a garter to keep her warm. "Guy's still asleep and nobody knows anything."

Even Guy had been aroused, however. We were still sitting over our unfinished meal when I heard him booming in the lobby. His belligerent bounce was gone when we went out to greet him and his yellow eyes looked bleared and hollow.

He was waiting for Kyrie and he didn't want to talk. We stood there a long time, shuffling about and watching the elevators in uneasy apprehension until at last Billie Fran brought her down. Looking pinched and pale, she came out to face him with an expression of blank apathy, as if he had been some unpleasant stranger she didn't care to meet.

"Ky, I've been asleep." His voice was flat and too loud, as if to challenge some unuttered apprehension. "I dreamed—I dreamed I was Nick."

Kyrie gasped and stared.

"I dreamed about the tach—the tachyon terminal." Guy shook his head and paused to peer around him, as if uncertain where or who he was. "I dreamed we had to get that beacon working."

"Yes?" Kyrie breathed. "Yes?"

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"That's what we've got to do, Ky." His forced, toneless voice almost denied his words. "We're going to Skygate. We're taking the jewel. We'll try to energize the beacon for Nick."

"Oh, Guy!" Kyrie swayed and caught at the back of a chair. The disbelief on her thin face changed to breathless wonder and at last to a dazzle of delight. "Nick would love you," she whispered. "He'd forgive you—if we could only light the beacon—"

GUY'S women were less enthusiastic. Already stunned by the storm and the frost, they were soon furious or weeping. Guy was sick and out of his mind, they said. His place was here with them and his babies. They all adored him and they couldn't live without him.

Yet here in his own kingdom Guy was clearly the king. When he raised his voice the uproar ceased. With a level of intelligence he had not displayed to me before, he began discussing plans for the trip, at first with Kyrie only but soon including Elving and me.

We decided to drive the hearse, the sturdiest vehicle available. Elving set about collecting spare parts, tires, drums of fuel. Guy called on his women for weapons and supplies. We pooled our scant knowledge of the fog areas and the militia posts and the roads possibly still open.

For weapons we had two hunting rifles, an ancient but accurate target pistol and a lightweight missile launcher that Guy had captured when he had ambushed an earlier raid of Spike Ballou's. There were only two or three boxes of ammunition for the guns and nine rounds for the launcher. Against fog and snakes and bandits ours seemed a meager arsenal.

Guy's new determination remained surprisingly firm in the face of all the hazards ahead of us. Yet his behavior troubled me. His normally voracious appetite was gone. His movements seemed weak and uncertain. His great paws had developed a tremor he could not control. His eyes looked swollen and dull and his voice had lost its old booming power. I began to wonder if he had contracted some unique disease.

When everything else was ready he waddled heavily across the street to the bank and returned with the nexode.

Kyrie cried out with delight when he put the splendid pyramid into her hands. Its radiation swiftly browned her bright face and somehow restored most of the vital beauty that Nick's death had drained out of her. She stood clutching it, peering raptly into its glowing hollows, until Guy replaced it in the box in which he had stored it.

Billie Fran ran after us when we went out to the coach, holding up Guy's bright-eyed daughter. Hys-

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terical, she wanted to go with us. She loved Guy. So did little Valkyrie. If he left them, they would die. Spike would come back and murder them.

Guy stopped and turned to listen. His shaking paws took the naked baby for a moment. Suddenly he pushed it back at Billie Fran. With an inarticulate howl he blundered blindly after us and squeezed his odorous bulk into the hearse.

Armed women crowded around the coach as Andy Elving tried to pull us away from the curb. Lib and Eva were there, both white-lipped with rage. Eva threw a rock that might have smashed the windshield if Kyrie hadn't leaned out to field it deftly. They all fell back, however, from Guy's bellow—which I thought echoed more agony than anger. He was sobbing convulsively as we drove away. Most of the women fell silent behind us but Billie Fran continued shrieking and waving Guy's naked child over her head for as long as I could see her.

ANDY ELVING was driving us through Greenway Park, a dozen miles out of Fairfax, when we splashed into the river ford. He gasped and collapsed halfway across. The hearse stalled. Guy lifted Andy from the wheel and I drove the hearse out of the river.

Andy was conscious again by the time we reached the bank, gasping brokenly that he would be okay, but I saw that his haggard face had turned cyanotic. Over his hoarse protests, we bundled him in blankets and drove ingloriously back to Fairfax through storm-leveled, frost-blackened fields.

The nurses at the hospital squealed with delight to have another glimpse of Guy and dutifully rushed Andy into the cardiac room. I shook his lax blue hand and promised to have his roses tended while he got well. In another hour, badly shaken and deflated, we set out once more.

At the wheel when we crossed the ford again, I was thinking of all the hard miles and unknown hazards ahead and missing Andy very much. Kyrie sat with me, forebodingly silent as I was. Guy was lying in the back, breathing heavily and apparently asleep.

Kyrie caught her breath as we lurched up the rocky bank, and I saw a man stumbling into the road ahead. A reeling monument of pure disaster, he was hatless and tattered, slick with dripping muck, splashed with blood. When his thumb jerked up I recognized my brother Tom.

Reflexively, I speeded the hearse and twisted the wheel to veer around him. Wildly waving both muddy arms, he jumped into our path again. I hit the horn and tried to nerve myself to run him down, but Kyrie was tugging at my arm.

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"Stop. It's Guy's father."

I stopped unwillingly. Tom came limping to us. He was short of breath, scratched and torn, coated with evil-smelling mud. Bright blood smeared his sleeves and his hands and the hilt of a knife in his belt. Clinging to the side of the hearse, he smiled grimly through his mask of red-spattered grime.

"Kimmie!" His wheezy voice tried to be ingratiating. "Kyrie, doll!" He ogled her lean golden nudity and turned to peer into the back of the hearse, where Guy was stirring uneasily on a blanket. "My son! How is my dear son?"

"We were better," I said, "before we met you."

"Now don't play the *nudnik*, Kim." He frowned impatiently at me and turned more hopefully to Kyrie. "All I need is a ride. Seems I've worn out my welcome here. I heard you here before and I was hoping you'd be back." He touched his knife and leaned again to grin slyly at Guy. "By the way, your women won't have any more trouble from our friend Spike Ballou."

"You killed him?" I recoiled from that casual implication. "Why?"

"Why not?" Tom turned to listen warily at the green wilderness behind him, new sweat gleaming on his face. "Let's go." His lowered voice grew urgent. "Before somebody gets around to cut us off. Whatever you're up to, I'll lend a hand." He swung persuasively back to me. "How about it, Kimmie?"

His smooth appeal recalled all the times in the past when he had spoiled things for me and I wanted to say we had no time to help him.

"Please, Uncle Kim," Kyrie stopped me softly. "Maybe he can take Mr. Elving's place." She looked gravely up at Tom. "Listen, Mr. Hood. We're on our way to Skygate. The tachyon terminal is standing there, complete but dead. We have to get there with the nexode to light the beacon. Maybe you can help us."

"The nex—" Something took Tom's breath. His fat face flickered with a dozen conflicting expressions, the last a bland smile. "You have the moon jewel? Here in the car? Of course I'll go with you. A chance I never expected. My last chance, perhaps, to pay my debts to the human race and maybe to see a better world than I was born in."

"I think we need you, Mr. Hood."

I wanted again to object, but Kyrie had already opened the door on her side of the coach. Serenely undisturbed by Tom's rank filth, she slid over to make room for him at her side. All I could do was drive on.

TOM asked about weapons and Kyrie had Guy pass a deer rifle to him. He tested the action and loaded it expertly. A few miles

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farther on, where the trees began to thin, he made me stop while he took the rifle and slipped ahead. After a wait we heard three rapid reports, muffled by the foliage.

Kyrie nodded for me to go on. We found Tom waiting where the road broke out of the trees a half-mile ahead. He had acquired a well-worn hat, a police pistol with a cartridge belt and a blood-smeared deck of narcorettes. Smugly silent, he lit one of them and climbed in with Kyrie.

Delayed by missing bridges and turned back by road blocks, we made camp that night in the burned ruin of a barn not fifty miles from Fairfax. Speaking for Guy, Kyrie announced that she and I and Tom would stand equal watches. When I awoke at daylight the camp was silent. I couldn't find Tom.

In disdain of such inventions as sleeping bags, Guy and Kyrie lay side by side on the scorched concrete that had been the barn floor and I stood frozen for an instant, shocked by the contrast between her long-limbed loveliness and his gigantic beastial and naked maleness.

Shuddering to obscure emotions stronger than my anger over Guy's defection, I shook them awake. We searched the camp. I found the nexode's empty case tossed into a pile of charred rubble near the hearse.

"Tom's gone," I told them, my outrage tempered with a certain secret satisfaction, because I had wanted not to pick him up. "Gone with the nexode!"

Guy rumbled in speechless fury, ready to join me in pursuit, but Kyrie advised us to wash and make breakfast. Tom came back while we were eating, waddling wearily, swinging the nexode in a burlap bag. With an air of sullen submission, he rolled it out of the bag at Kyrie's feet.

"*Gevalt!*" He shivered and wheezed, shrinking away from the blazing tetrahedron. "That damn thing's too much for me."

Kyrie picked it up and paused to blow and brush the dust from its bright triangles. It washed her skin with a richer tan as she smiled across it at Tom.

"I was depending on it to bring you back," she told him gently. "We've got a long way to go and we still need you, Mr. Hood."

"I'll do what you say." Tom's instant agreement astonished me. "Anything you say."

She pointed at the water trough and found him a pair of clean coveralls that had been packed for Andy Elving. In moments we were on our way again.

FUTURITY

XXII

THE interface between Tom and the tetrahedron was too subtle

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for me to grasp—if interface is an adequate word for that invisible thing. He was strangely changed, almost a human metamorph. Unwontedly subdued, he rarely spoke and then generally with the Yiddish intonations he had learned from our father and abandoned in his youth. He obeyed Kyrie's soft-spoken requests without objection and sometimes he even listened to me.

Guy became our leader, displaying a resourceful cunning that surprised me. I suppose his long war with Spike Ballou had taught him how to deal with bandits, but I never understood where he had received his new insight into people or his uncanny sense for traps and ambushes.

His huge eyes shone at night with a golden phosphoresence and he could see to drive through blackness that seemed absolute to me. Again and again he stopped us to wait while he crept through the dark ahead to break up a roadblock and return with a captured weapon or a sack of supplies.

We moved cautiously, keeping away from streams and valleys when we could. Often we had to turn back from an unexpected lake of fog. One frosty moonlit night we crossed a wild white river of it on a long highway bridge the ants had somehow left.

Again, trapped by an uneasy white sea rising behind us, we waited through most of a day for the wind and sun to clear the fog from a shallow wash still damp from rain. Guy had gone to sleep in the back, as inert and odorific as something dead, and Tom took the wheel to drive us through the gray wisps and tatters still crawling out of the mud.

As we lurched and splashed through the pools of thin red slime the fog had left among the rocks at the bottom of the wash, I saw scattered bones beside the road, bones of a horse and a man. Beneath one lifting shred of mist I caught sight of something else—a flat and endless ribbon of livid red flesh, trapped there in the clotting mud, writhing and squalling among the red bones as if tortured by the sun.

I was shivering and nearly ill for the rest of the day from a shock I couldn't understand. I had seen space aliens before and far too many remains of my unlucky fellow men. What unnerved me was the agony in that thin squalling. It had sounded like a human child.

In the beginning Guy was awake and active for two or three days at a time, exhausting the rest of us. As we went on, however, he slept more often and for longer periods but with no benefit that I could see.

He always awoke petulant and feverish, parched with thirst. The tremor of his paws was growing worse. He complained of weakness and giddiness and strange aching pains in every part of his body. And he had been dreaming.

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HE USED to tell Kyrie about his dreams, hoping she could explain them. He was never himself, he said, but always Nick. He was always on his way to the terminal tower or already there, working to energize the tachyon beacon.

"It frightens me, Ky," I heard him mutter. "Everything is too plain—too real. I see every part of the terminal— I understand all the parts of it the way Nick did."

He drew a harsh, uneven breath.

"In those dreams, Ky—I am Nick. I think the way he did. I remember all he knew. And the worst—the worst part is what I think of Guy." His paws came up in a searching way to rub his furry face as if seeking to identify himself. "I'm sorry for Guy. The poor, stupid beast, born all wrong. I know he's good for nothing. I try to tolerate him. Because Kyrie used to like him. But I'm afraid of him, too. I know he hates me because he wants Kyrie. But I don't know what he can do to hurt us, because even he doesn't know his own power."

He struck at the air with great open paws as if fighting off some unseen enemy, his long claws unsheathed and shining like black glass.

"What's wrong, Ky?" he whispered hoarsely. "Am I crazy?"

"I'm sure you aren't insane." She stroked his trembling arm consolingly. "You may have picked up some space infection, but I think the nexode is causing your dreams, Guy. I think it has begun to make an interface with you."

"What face?" Raw terror rasped his throat. "What's an interface? What's happening to me?"

"I don't know, Guy." Her stroking hand drew quickly back as if she shared his dread. "I'm afraid to guess."

Strangely, as it seemed to me, each long period of dream-ridden sleep left Guy more like Nick. He spoke faster, used longer words and displayed a better brain. Sometimes I thought I heard Nick's intonations in his voice. As he lost weight—for he had all but ceased to eat—I sometimes thought I caught subtle hints of Nick in the way he looked and moved.

Though I never quite understood Kyrie's philosophy, she had come to accept Nick's death with what looked like a quiet fatalism. She no longer hated Guy—I wasn't sure just how she felt. Remarkably serene, she often ignored the rest of us and all the hazards of the road while she sat for hours with the tetrahedron in her golden hands, great eyes lost in its luminous hollow.

"Why fret so?" she asked me once. "I don't understand what's happening to poor Guy. I'm not sure we'll be able to reach the terminal or that we can light the ter-

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minal even if we do get there. But we're trying.

Sometimes she was happy enough for childish play. Once she tried to teach me a numerical game Nick had invented. Though I was never able to master the rules, it seemed to involve a race between the players to find large prime numbers that would complete certain intricate symmetrical sequences.

"Sorry, Uncle Kim." She smiled affectionately when I gave up in disgust. "I had forgotten how much you hate to think."

She began to pass the time as she did long ago with her incomprehensible music, blown and beaten out of an odd set of instruments she had picked up along the way. Now the helmet of a dead militiaman made a melancholy drum. Empty cartridge cases and beer cans became sad pipes. A thin scrap of bullet-punctured armor vibrated in her deft brown hands, moaning and howling and wailing.

I never learned to like her music, though it sent Guy into twitching and whimpering ecstasy. But I could never forget it, either. Its eerie sweetness and its painful dissonance and its ungraspable scales are still alive, throbbing in some dim corner of my mind. And they come back to burn my eyes with tears when I think of Kyrie.

Somewhere we had crossed an unmarked frontier out of the region where scattered militia forces still tried to guard the refugees from the rising fog and their lawless fellow men. We had come into the higher, dryer western uplands stripped of metal by the ants, abandoned by mankind and as yet penetrated only here and there by probing tongues of fog.

This was the region where the pilot, Clayton Carter, had nearly died in his flight from the ants, but rains had come since his ordeal. We found water in the prairie lakes. Without human marauders in our way we made good time. I had nearly forgotten the snakes until a bright autumn afternoon brought us into view of the mountains of central New Mexico. Though the uplands were still blue and far, I knew the snakes were nesting there and suddenly I was cold and giddy again with recollection of that disaster when the passing snake brought our plane down into the hailstorm.

Guy was asleep in the back of the coach. I wanted to stop until he awoke, but Kyrie had recognized the mountains and she was anxious to press on for at least a glimpse of the terminal tower before we camped. Tom agreed with Kyrie that our motor probably ran too cool to attract the snakes so we went on.

GAPS in the pavement delayed us. At sunset Tom gave the

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wheel to me and went to sleep in the back with Guy. Kyrie sat silent beside me, the glowing pyramid cradled in her hands, her anxious eyes on the dusky horizon. We crept on by the faint gray light of the low crescent moon.

Here the ants had leveled everything. With no road signs, we were pretty well lost. But the moon guided us west and I could tell from the pull of the motor that we were climbing steadily. At each new crest I felt something of Kyrie's eagerness to see the tower.

Yet the strain of driving tired me. As each moonlit summit revealed nothing more exciting than a higher one ahead I began to feel a desolate sense of isolation. Kyrie became an untouchable stranger. The nexode was a riddle I could never hope to solve. The transgalactic culture was a fantastic myth that didn't really matter. The loneliness of the arid and abandoned landscape crept into me until I could almost feel myself becoming the last man alive.

"Uncle Kim!" Kyrie caught my arm and I almost recoiled from her. "There it is!"

I saw the terminal through a break in the hills to our left, its vastness diminished with distance. Though we had been driving a long time in the dark, the sun still struck its upper stages, outlining them in purple and splendid gold.

"Tomorrow—" her voice rang with joy—"we'll be there." Next I heard her breath catch and sudden trouble in her tone. "What's that shadow? Did you see it, Uncle Kim?"

The dead beacon was the highest point of the tower, its dark onion dome hard to make out against the night sky. What I saw was an odd veil of darkness slipping down from the black beacon, dimming and blurring the upper stages of the terminal.

"It's probably just the twilight," I said.

"No." Her voice was sharp with fear. "The shadow of the Earth rises from the foot of the tower. That darkness is crawling down from the top. It must be something else."

She glanced at the pyramid in her hands and I felt her shiver.

"I think it's the snakes," she whispered sharply. "They must be nesting on the tower. After all, it rises almost into empty space, where they feel at home. I'm afraid we're going to have trouble."

That trouble came sooner than I had expected. The terminal tower dropped for a time below the moonlit hills as we drove on. The rose-and-purple of twilight had risen higher when we saw it again and the stranger darkness of the snakes had crept lower from the beacon dome, filming the whole tower with a ghostly unreality. I was trying without success to

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imagine a tachyon ship landing on its fading stages when a snake buzzed us.

Acrid bitterness flashed across my tongue. A chilling numbness brushed me. The headlamps went out. I had the briefest glimpse of its serpentine shadow dipping and lifting against the moon-washed sky. It was gone before I heard its sonic crash.

IT LEFT us stalled on the road. Tom awoke, grumbling Yiddish that I couldn't understand. We lifted the hood and struck matches. Though nothing else was visibly damaged, all the batteries were drained. Even our flashlights were dead. We failed to start the motor.

Dead tired and still shivering with that bone-deep chill, I wanted to make camp. But we were near the summit, Kyrie said—so high the snakes might descend on us again. She shook Guy awake and we pushed the hearse a mile or more over the highest crest.

That far-off phantom tower had dissolved into the dark by then, but we pressed on down the winding canyon road toward the valley of the Rio Grande and the ruins of Albuquerque. Guy was asleep again, groaning and twitching as if pushing the hearse had been too much for him. Coasting now, we rolled down through the moonlight in a ghostly silence that set me to shivering with a sense that we had become inhuman company on an unearthly errand.

"We'll be safer in the valley." Even Kyrie's soft whisper startled me. "We can surely start the motor when it's light enough to see. Can't we, Uncle Kim? I hope we reach Skygate tomorrow."

The night was thicker in the canyon, but I knew the road from driving it on winter holidays in that long-ago world, now strangely unreal, when a few of us used to ski on the high Sandia slopes. Suzie had come once, though not exactly with me. I got to thinking of her, wondering what had happened to her since I left Skygate and whether Thorsen had survived his space infection. The need for sleep forgotten, I drove on in a kind of waking dream.

Two or three times, where the grade was too flat, we had to wake Tom to help us push again, but the thin cold moon was still high when we came out of the canyon into view of the mesa and the valley.

Steering by the gray edge of the pavement, searching the dark for washouts or rocks on the road, I wasn't looking far ahead. I felt Kyrie stiffen and shiver, heard her gasp of dismay. Braking to an instinctive stop, I saw the fog.

A flood of luminescent white, nearly as bright as the bitten moon, it drowned the dead city. It filled the wide valley from the mounded ruins just below us to the line of lifeless volcanoes on the

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horizon. It reached north and south as far as I could see.

Though I could feel no wind, the mist was stirring strangely, rising and falling in soundless waves that broke against the rocks and the dark rubble islands, shattering into ghostly dissipating plumes.

"No!" Kyrie sobbed. "No!"

But it was there, too deep for the morning sun to break it up, too wide for anything to bridge, spread too far to leave us a way around it. For a long time we simply sat there in the dead hearse. There was nothing else to do.

I fastened my jacket and shivered in it, as the chill of the desert night followed the heat-drain of the snake, but Kyrie seemed to feel no cold. A remote white goddess in the dying light, she gazed sometimes at the useless glow of the tetrahedron in her hands, more often at that wild but silent sea ahead. My throat ached with a dull regret for the failure of our mission and a sharper pity for her.

A breath of wind must have risen, because the odor of the fog rolled over us in a sudden, suffocating wave, rank as the stink of a jungle swamp, fetid as a sewer, its muskmelon sweetness blended with an overpowering foulness. Though Kyrie seemed unconscious of it, I felt nauseated.

"Let's get out," I urged her. "I guess we can't move the hearse, but we ought to make camp before the moon goes down. Somewhere higher—we passed a good spot in the canyon. The fog may rise in the dark."

She nodded dully, as if nothing mattered now. I set the brakes and clambered out of the hearse. I was dancing a slow shuffle on the pavement, trying to bring my stiffened limbs to life, when she screamed.

Her outcry was wordless, agonized, desolate. When I called to know what the matter was her only answer was a thin moan of pain. I struck a match and found her kneeling over Guy in the back of the hearse.

"He's dead," she sobbed then. "Guy's dead—"

XXIII

TOM groaned and awoke. We all crowded into the back of the hearse to examine Guy by the feeble flare of matches. He lay inert and swollen, with no breath or pulse. Kyrie splashed water on him, rubbed and flexed his furry limbs, tried to breathe into his mouth. Nothing revived him. Working over him, I began to catch an odor of dissolution ranker than his barnyard scent, stronger than the fetor of the fog.

Retreating from that smell of death, I climbed out of the hearse and saw the fog again. It glowed with its own cold light, though the moon had set. Rising silently, it

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had already drowned those black rubble islets. A wide tongue of it had licked into the canyon, was lapping at the pavement not a hundred yards below the hearse.

I shouted a warning. Tom scrambled out to join me, but Kyrie refused to leave Guy. He was too heavy for us to carry, but she stayed in the hearse, hauling vainly at him until Tom assumed our father's thick accent to tell her a peasant tale about a goat boy who was eaten by a wolf because he wouldn't leave his millet porridge.

"I suppose we ought to save our lives," she whispered huskily then. "Though I see no good that we can do alone." We were waiting to help her from the hearse, but she flung herself wildly back upon the corpse. "Oh, Guy! Guy!"

She lay sobbing on his body till a long foul tongue of fog licked into the ditch beside us, drowning us with its nauseating miasma. Silently then, Kyrie let us lead her up the canyon road.

As we started away from the hearse my foot struck something that made a jangling clatter. I picked up the object. In the pale glow of the tetrahedron, which Kyrie clutched in both stiff hands, I saw the glint of a hexagonal head and the gleam of wire-like limbs.

It was a dead mechanical ant, one of a swarm that lay in a glittering drift along the edge of the pavement, where it must have fallen when Nick was killed. I held it out to Kyrie, I suppose with some fantastic hope that she might revive it. She looked at me bleakly and I tossed it back into the dark.

Dull with despair, silent as the fog itself, we climbed back into the canyon. The pyramid gave enough light to help us follow the pavement. Tom and I had brought blankets and canteens and our small stock of food. Plodding stolidly, breath wheezing, he smoked his last narcorette.

I stopped to look back once. That wild white sea was tossing as if an unseen storm raged beneath it. The rocks around the canyon mouth broke it into soundless spray. I shuddered and heard Tom muttering a Yiddish prayer. We stumbled after Kyrie.

We made a cold and cheerless camp a mile from the fog, in a shallow cave above the road that refugees from Albuquerque must have dug. I found a few sticks of wood stacked beside a fire circle stone, but Kyrie was afraid a flame might draw the snakes. A dull hunger was gnawing at my belly, but we had to save our food. I washed my mouth with one sip of water and crawled into my blanket.

TOM was soon snoring, but Kyrie didn't sleep. Immune to cold, she sat cross-legged at the mouth of the cave, the luminous pyramid cupped in her hands,

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her sad eyes watching the way we had come. Her stricken desolation shook me.

Bare to the glow of that great stone, her lean body was infinitely inviting, yet it stirred in me only a cold ghost of ardor. Desire itself was dying in the shattered world around us. What I felt was an infinite pity, an almost maternal urge to comfort her, to break her black despair. I remembered all the childhood years when she had been almost a daughter, with a child's frank affection for her fond Uncle Kim. But in this doleful moment I could not even speak to her.

At last I slept, though I had meant to share her vigil. I awoke numb with cold. The cave was dark. The glow of the nexode was gone. Tom's snores had ceased. I whispered and fumbled and found nobody.

Shaking with terror, I stumbled barefoot out of the cave. Seeing the high blaze of Orion, I knew that midnight was long past. The starlit road looked empty. When I called the only answer was a whispery echo from a distant cliff.

My toes struck a rock as I blundered toward the pavement. The flash of pain cooled my first panic. I limped back to the cave for my shoes and then crept down the road to search for Tom and Kyrie.

I failed to find them. The odor of the fog stopped me above the canyon mouth, a wall of unbreathable evil. I climbed a rock to look for the hearse. That insane white tide was breaking over it now, so that it appeared and vanished again beneath the writing tongues of luminiscent mist.

A funeral calm crept over me as I stood there. I gave up my useless shouting and wandered back at last to the cave. Trembling more from dread than cold, I slipped again into my blanket and waited aimlessly for day.

In my haunted thoughts Tom and Kyrie had died in some new effort to rescue Guy's body. I could visualize the fog flooding all the world, squeezing out the last human zone as it rose to meet the high dominion of the snakes. Perhaps I was already the last man alive.

Oddly, my own fate did not matter now. Existence had become an emotionless abstraction. As I looked back into the past from that comfortless cave, my life revealed itself as a meaningless monotony of shabby failure and deadening frustration. I had been a lonely spectator, silently watching the rich feast of being that I could never fully join.

I recalled my old, unwilling envy of Tom, who had always seized the good things I somehow could never reach. My opposite, always the bold actor, never the timid or self-denying or self-right-

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eous onlooker, had lived what seemed a more rewarding life than mine. Perhaps our father had been right. Perhaps I really was the *schlemiel*.

Exhausted by such profitless reflections, I fell into a troubled sleep. I recall a dream in which Tom and I were skiing down the highest Sandia slope. I was stiff and clumsy with the bitter cold. Tom swept far ahead and I envied his bold skill at the jump. Unsure of myself, I was afraid I couldn't make the turn. I thought I was going over the rim, into the black, pine-fringed canyon below it.

But a girl's warm voice called my name. At first I thought it was Suzie, but it was Kyrie I saw when I looked back, nude and splendid, somehow flying over the snow with no skis at all. She overtook me and reached to grasp my hand. I knew we could make the turn together.

Something woke me then and the shock of stark reality shattered the joy of that improbable dream. No voice had called my name. A gray ray of dawnlight stabbed into the cave, but it brought no warmth. I was numb with cold and utterly alone.

TOO numb at first to stand or think, I crept out into the heatless sun. I sat for a while on a rock outside the cave, kneading my stiff muscles. When I felt able I drank a careful third of the water left in my canteen and shuffled down the road to look for Tom and Kyrie.

Where the canyon widened I could see the upper stages of the tachyon terminal rising out of pink mushroom fields of far-off cumulus into the cloudless stratosphere, still wavering and fading like a high mirage beneath the shadow of the nesting snakes.

The pavement lay empty ahead, with no trace of Tom or Kyrie until I came out of the canyon on the shore of the fog. Its heaving surface seemed calmer by day, dissolving into crawling blueish tatters as its tiny live balloons exploded in the sun, but its putrid fetor turned me ill.

It had receded enough to uncover our abandoned hearse, its tongues still licked around the wheels. Beneath those fading wisps of mist, I saw patches of wet, blood-colored slime on the pavement and on the rocks where the fog had lain.

Reeling and retching from that rotten sweetness, I improvised a mask from a handkerchief saturated with the last water in my canteen and plunged through those writhing tendrils to reach the hearse.

Guy's body was gone. For a moment I thought Tom and Kyrie must have come back to carry it away. Then I saw blood puddled on the floor, seeping from a mound of putrefying fur. Glass-

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black claws gleamed on the fingers of a queer glove peeled from a gray-furred paw. I reached gingerly to move a dark-tipped ear and spilled loose fangs that clattered like gravel.

Shrinking back, numb with shock, I thought the body had been butchered by the unseen creatures of the fog. I searched the pavement, alert for any other evidence, for any sign of Tom or Kyrie, and found another puzzle.

Gouts of red had splashed the pavement behind the hearse. At first I thought the receding fog had left them there, but then I saw that the glistening patches of blood-colored slime had not come so high. The gouts were Guy's blood, marking a trail where his flesh had been dragged.

The odd thing was the direction of that darkening trail. It led me off the pavement, across a rocky ditch scattered with the dead metal ants and up a steep slope away from the road and the slime and the fog.

Scrambling up that slope, I discovered Tom and Kyrie in a scene that stunned me. The mechanical ants lay dead in glittering windrows of silver-and-black around the edges of a great disk of white stone. Kyrie sat cross-legged on one side of the stone, her golden nudity splotched with blood. Tom stood at the other, bare to the waist and scarlet as a pirate. Between them lay the red body they themselves must have skinned out of Guy's fur.

I caught my breath to call out, but something stopped me. My wonder and horror were compounded with a sudden sense of awe. The shining, snow-white stone was like an altar. Kyrie was the mad priestess, Tom the sacrificial priest. The bleeding offering between them must have been Guy's corpse.

Shaken, I crouched behind a shelving stone to watch what went on. The skinned head lay in Kyrie's lap. She held the blazing nexode against its forehead. Standing over the dark-clotted feet, Tom was chanting ritual words I didn't understand. In response to the chant, Kyrie's red fingers flashed about the nexode, touching its bright triangles as if they had been the controls of some mysterious machine.

I crouched there a long time. Ants crawled on me—the live desert insects. Afraid they might sting, I was more afraid to move. From Tom's voice and Kyrie's action I began to catch a sense of urgent tension, a grave purpose and a growing fear of failure.

Tom's chant abruptly stopped. Kyrie froze, staring at him across the tetrahedron. In the silence I heard the lazy drone of a big blue fly and saw it settling on that stiff red face. A red hand brushed at it—and I gasped with astonishment.

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THE body was alive. A stranger discovery—what I saw beneath the blood was not naked muscle and tendon but intact skin. I realized that this was not the hideous flayed thing that I had been imagining, but somehow a whole man. His hand reached for the nexode. Moving with an easy grace, he sat up on the spattered stone.

"Hi, Ky!"

"Nick!" Her breathless cry was a sob of mingled agony and joy. "Nicky!"

Something close to terror shook me, because the voice was Nick's—perhaps a little deeper than I recalled it. The blood-bathed man was Nick—or at least an excellent copy, perhaps a bit heavier and taller. Frowning a little against the sun, he looked around and saw Tom.

"Hello, Hood."

"Gevalt!" Tom stumbled backward. His fat hands flew up defensively. For once in his life he was ruled by pure emotion, by terror at his own handiwork. "What—what sort of thing are you?" His gazing eyes appealed to Kyrie. "What have we done?"

"We've beaten death," Kyrie whispered.

"What is all this?" Nick came to his feet with the agile grace I remembered, peering down at the blood-smeared stone, off at the crawling fog, back at Kyrie. "Where's Uncle Kim?"

I caught my breath, but found that I could not announce myself. I was still too deeply shaken, paralyzed with bewilderment and dread.

"Asleep in the cave," Kyrie was saying. "Poor little man. I'm afraid he hasn't entirely got over his gamma-form infection. I couldn't bear to disturb him."

"Let him sleep." Nick turned as if to step off the gleaming disk, paused to frown at the glistening piles of lifeless ants around it, came slowly back to Kyrie. "We've problems enough of our own."

"But we're all right now." Her soft voice was almost too quick and eager, as if she could hardly believe her own words. "We can solve them, Nicky, now that you're alive!"

He stood staring across the tattered sea of fog toward the far white billows of cumulus and the dim mirage of the terminal tower rippling in the sky.

"The most singular thing." He glanced at the bright pyramid in his hands and back at Kyrie's tense face. "Stranger than all of this." Anxiously he stepped a little toward her. "I've been dreaming. Dreaming I was Guy. I even thought I'd killed Nick—"

His voice broke off sharply. He leaned to peer at Kyrie's hands, swung to frown at the dark-stained knife stuck in Tom's belt, suddenly looked down at himself,

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rubbing in a startled way at his own blood-stiffened skin.

"So I *was* Guy!" Nodding in a dazed way, he looked back at Kyrie. "But I've been—he's been—changing?" Slow at first, his breathless voice came faster and faster as he spoke. "The nexode did it, I suppose. The nexode and the nonhuman side of our own nature. I must be—a metamorph! Like that red bubble of beta-life in my mother's laboratory bottle. All Guy's illness—that sleepiness and pain we couldn't understand—that must have been the beginning of the process. And now I've been born again. Out of his skin. With you and Hood for midwives."

"Oh, Nicky!" Kyrie was shivering, her voice so low that I could scarcely hear. "It's true Guy killed you back at Fairfax. Last night when the fog stopped us here I thought he—you—were dead. I thought we were done for, our lives wasted and the terminal lost. I can't quite believe—"

"I never expected anything like this." Nick was turning and flexing his hand, eyeing it with the dazzled wonder of a child unwrapping some fabulous toy. "I never hoped—" He stopped to nod. "But I suppose our experience here on only one planet was too limited to show us the full capacity of life." He looked at Kyrie. "How did you do it?"

"You did it, Nicky. Though I suppose the nexode helped. Last night in the cave—it showed me that you were alive in Guy's dead skin. It showed me what we had to do and I woke Tom to help. But with time enough—if there had been no danger from the fog—I think you might have done everything yourself."

"You're too good, Ky." He was fondly teasing for an instant, before his grave eyes lifted back to the shadow-mantled terminal. "But we still have work to do. There's our beacon, dead."

"A roosting place for the snakes."

He frowned at the lifeless ants piled around the white stone. "Our replicators are also dead."

"They stopped when you died."

"Then they ought to start again."

Hesitantly, trembling, she picked up a small, still machine and held it before him. He thrust a red forefinger toward its silver head. Though no spark passed, the bright device came alive, stirred in her hands, rose to wheel around Nick's head.

I heard a high mosquito-whine, which spread all around me. The dead ants below the stone began rising from the ground by twos and threes, by scores, by hundreds. They flew to join a circling swarm, which settled toward the end of the stone. I smelled hot sulphur.

"Ai-yi-yi!" Tom cowered back. "All this is too much."

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"It's okay, Mr. Hood," Kyrie called to him. "The replicators are no space invaders. They are ours."

The spinning swarm poured down toward the stone. Though I saw no gesture of command, the ants began joining together, limbs interweaving, silver heads joining to form honeycomb panels which flexed and fused into a hollow ten-foot globe, a black gangway rising to its open door.

"Perhaps we weren't born for nothing." Nick waved Tom and Kyrie toward the ramp. "Let's get the nexode to the terminal. If the snakes don't object too much I think we can light the beacon after all."

"Nicky! Nicky!" Kyrie whispered. "If we can!"

She skipped up the ramp with the tetrahedron, but Tom hung back, scowling at its surface of slick black tail-balls as if he expected them to sting him.

"Will the ants do anything you want?" He squinted shrewdly at Nick, loud and bold again, almost himself. "Could you make them find me a pack of narcorettes?" he asked.

"Come along," Nick said. "I want to pick up Uncle Kim."

"My *yukl* brother" Tom shrugged. "Why waste time on that poor *shmuck?* Better leave him where he is. He's no utopian. He'll never be happy in our new world."

XXIV

STUNG to anger I stood up to challenge Tom. Kyrie was calling from inside the bright globe, I think defending me. Nick took Tom's fat arm, swung him firmly toward the black ramp. I tried to shout, but something caught my voice.

Something made me giddy. Something brushed me with icy sweat. Something left me drained and swaying. I sank back behind the shelving rock, sick with a puzzled rage at myself.

Though I never knew exactly what had seized me, there was the blackness inside the hollow globe. There was the piercing stridor of the ants that formed it—and their steamy, acrid reek. There was Tom's cautious shrewdness as he tested the black ramp and his bold swagger when he climbed it.

Then there was Nick, red with alien blood, newborn from Guy's hide, gazing impatiently across the heaving tide of fog toward that bank of far cloud and the snake-veiled stages of the tachyon terminal. Though I had known the children all their lives, Nick was a frightening stranger now.

Sobbing miserably, bewildered at myself, I began to feel a barb of piercing truth in Tom's scornful words. I had known and loved the children as fascinating visitors to my own familiar world, but this world was theirs. I feld a sudden

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sick conviction that it was not for me.

My world had been the narrow ghetto flat where the heat was often off and cockroaches swarmed under the sink and the toilet overflowed. It had been the petty bickering of my parents, my father's ugly business and my mother's ugly death. It had been Tom's scheming climb and my own half-honest career in promotion and publicity. I was what that gray and painful world had made me—a *schlemiel*, perhaps as my father used to say. Looking at myself in this cold light, I could see no useful place for me in the new world beyond the fog, in that dazzling future the children were about to usher through the tachyon terminal.

I lay silent in the grip of a sick paralysis as Nick followed Tom into the silver globe. The ramp rolled up to seal the dark opening. Sweating and trembling, uncertain of what I wanted or what to do, I watched the bright ball sail up the canyon toward the cave. It dropped beyond the cliffs. Nick or Kyrie must have left it to search the cave for me. A few minutes later it rose again, a diminishing moon gliding high above the fog toward that far tower.

Calmer after it was gone, I began to feel a remote sense of hope and joy. Whatever became of me, Nick and Kyrie were moving toward their cosmic triumph. After sixty million years on the barren moon the black seed from the messenger missile was about to bear its destined fruit.

Impelled by an aimless curiosity, I climbed to that reddened altar stone. Its top was circular and flat, twenty feet across. White and dense, slick and oddly warm to the touch, it was hard enough to break the point of my pocket knife. Before I had solved its riddle, a new swarm of ants funneled down upon me.

Frightened and bewildered, I stumbled out of their way. They rattled on the stone like metal hail and began to knit themselves into a silver shell around it. The sun flickered and my tongue turned bitter. Their shrieking whine drilled into my brain. Staggering back, I watched them rising with the stone.

Its shape astonished me. No disk, it was a cone—the capstone, I believe, shaped to complete the onion dome of the tachyon beacon. Dropped by the ants when Nick was killed, it had fallen point down, penetrating to leave its base nearly level with the rock it shattered. Extracted, it left a yawning pit.

Blind to me, the ants soared away with it. Their shriek died, and their brimstone scent dissolved in the stagnant stench of the fog. The sun turned hot and bright again. I tossed a pebble into the pit and wandered back to the road.

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I PLODDED up the canyon through a mist of gray regret, thinking wistfully of Guy's abandoned kingdom and the warm refuge from all the terrors of space I had once found there. My dull wonder about the fate of Billie Fran and Andy Elving and our green-gartered guards became a sudden decision. I would go back to Fairfax.

The short climb had left me already puffing for breath and looking for a place to sit. My purpose wavered a little when I realized my weakness and remembered the cruel ordeal Clayton Carter had endured in his epic retreat from the ants. But as a fugitive from the terminal and the children's new world I had nowhere else to go.

The journey might be easier for me than Carter had found it. I should find water enough after the autumn rains. With luck, I might find food plants maturing on abandoned farms and game or cattle that I could kill. By afternoon I was almost cheerful, whistling as I cleaned the deer rifle, sunned the blankets, filled the canteens from a spring I had found above the cave, repacked my slim provisions—already finding an emotional haven in the primitive simplicities of a roving hunter's existence.

As I lay that night on my hard bed, waiting to start at dawn, I felt a curious detachment from everything, almost as if my life had already closed. Looking back at myself, with no emotion save a dull desire that things had been different, I found myself weighing all my shabby failures. If I had really been a *schlemiel*, where was the blame?

My flaw had been a failure to love, it seemed to me, due to a failure to understand. It was, I thought, a family fault. If my mother had ever learned to laugh at my father's Yiddish jokes, if he had ever learned not to laugh at the ways of her Ozark kin, if Tom and I had really known each other . . .

At last I slept, plagued by dreadful dreams in which the scarlet, skinless monsters of the fog were stalking me to take my hide. I woke before dawn, aching all over, soaked with sweat and shivering. Imagining that the gamma-life was teeming in my blood again, I lay staring drearily at the dark until I saw a blood-red glow on the back of the cave.

At first I thought it must be another symptom of my space infection, distorting my senses and eroding my reason. I tried to lie still, but panic began to whisper that some new doom had come to consume the world. I crawled out of my wet blankets to find the source of the glow.

The westward sky was turning strangely scarlet above the black canyon rim, as if a dying sun were rising in the wrong direction. I staggered out in bare feet and

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went back to get my shoes. That red glare was bright enough to help me find them.

Shaking with cold and dread, I crept down the road to get a better view. The glow in the west grew brighter as I went. Slowly changing color, it had washed the stony cliffs with gold before I came in sight of the tachyon terminal.

A dazed comprehension stopped me there, my terror fading into awe. The light in the sky shone from the onion dome that topped the tallest tower—no doubt completed now with that conic altar stone on which Nick had been reborn. Relieved, yet still appalled before all the unknowns of the transgalactic universe, I knew that Nick and Kyrie already had the beacon calling across the light-years to their mysterious progenitors.

I stood there a long time, watching the beacon change. The shroud of snakes was gone. Dazzling in the crystal air, the tower looked near enough to touch. The tall cone bathed the barren landscape in an eerie green, which faded slowly through midnight blue into a dying violet dusk. I waited, shivering in the wind, until the red was born again.

The actual tachyon signal was invisible of course, leaping across its own strange domain beyond the limited velocity of light. This visible signal must have been meant only to guide a decelerating starship through its final homing approach to the landing stage. Even as I thought of that, the changing splendor of the beacon brushed me with a vain regret.

I might have been part of all this. I might have called out to Nick and Kyrie and followed them into their flying globe. I might have been with them in that wondrous tower now, waiting for their star-born creators. Instead . . .

Whimpering and miserable, I stumbled back to the cave. As I lay there shivering through the rest of the night, staring at the changing glow on the smoke-stained rock, I decided to wait, to watch for the tachyon ship to come in.

But as the gray dawn came a cold west wind drowned me in the fetid muskmelon-sweetness of the fog and suddenly I knew I couldn't stay. I had no way of knowing when that tachyon signal might reach the unknown powers of the messenger missiles—or whether it ever would. Even if the signal should bring a starship to earth, I had no way of guessing the time a tachyon flight might take. I did know that the handful of dried beef and parched corn left in my pack would keep me going for only a few days.

Sick with the breath of the fog, I struggled stiffly into my gear and began the long climb out of the valley, toward the snake-haunted summit and the abandoned lands

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beyond. The rainbow glow of the beacon was still washing the cliffs above me with colors of wonder when I set out, but the gray daylight soon erased it.

HERE my recollections blur. Whether from starvation and exhaustion or from that recurrent gamma-form infection—or from sheer depth of hope—my awareness shattered into disconnected fragments. Sun, dust, rocks, frost, hail. Mountain wall and desert mirage. The blinding blaze of thirst, the crazy fever buzz in my head, the black laughter of despair. Days of slogging on when all I wanted was to lie down. Nights of paralyzing cold in cheerless camps where I was afraid to make a fire because I thought the snakes might come.

Those cruel trials were real. They are tangled in my memory with stranger impressions in which hard reality seems to blend into fantastic dreams. I recall one moonless night when I lay on flat high ground, with not even a rock or a bush to break the icy wind. I couldn't sleep. I was following the wheeling constellations, wondering dully what sort of creature might come from the stars to answer the tachyon signal—if anything did—when I thought I saw a new star in the east.

Or a planet, perhaps, for it didn't twinkle. Yet, cobalt-blue, it was the wrong color for any planet, and it was soon too bright. Its color slowly changed, to an unbelievable green, to ocher and orange, to a redder red than Mars. It went out and winked back again, indigo-blue.

Faster than any possible planet, it climbed toward the zenith. In the green and yellow phases its unearthly light tinted the dead landscape around me with a frosty, moonlike strangeness, so bright I trembled with an irrational terror that the snakes might discover me.

Sailing overhead, it swelled into a visible globe. I put down the mad urge to look for a hiding place and stood to watch it sinking toward the west. The cycle of its changing hues had begun accelerating and now I began to notice a sort of echo that must have come from the tachyon beacon.

The terminal was below my horizon here, but I could see its remote glow against the sky, a red explosion as the red globe winked out, a race through the spectrum while the globe was dark, a blue dusk dying behind the black mountain ridge as the globe burned blue again. Always alternating, those cycles of light ran faster, faster, until the flicker hurt my eyes. Yet I watched until the globe had set like a flashing moon behind the far peaks and the night was abruptly black again.

I don't remember wondering what that luminous object could

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have been or why the terminal had answered its flashes or where it might have fallen. Rolled in my blanket again, I lay numbly waiting for the snakes. I must have slept, for I remember thinking they had found me. Turned to ribbons of raw red flesh, they stank with the suffocating foulness of the fog and sang to me in Kyrie's voice while they licked my skin away.

Again, in an endless nightmare that must have been at least partly real, I thought I saw the fog. Drenched and shivering from a thin fall rain, I had nerved myself to climb one last hill. In the valley beyond, instead of the firewood and shelter I longed for, I found a flood of heaving whiteness, invisibly stirred from beneath and reaching as far as I could see.

I slept under the road in a concrete pipe, sweating through dreadful dreams in which the fog had risen over me and trapped me in the pipe. I lay too weak to move or even breathe. When I crawled out at dawn that evil sea had somehow drained away, leaving its red slime to mark the level it had reached. My real dreams are still haunted with the figments of the strange daymare that followed, in which I was struggling to cross that fearful valley where the fog had lain.

Sick with its lingering muskmelon fetor, I slipped and toppled and crept through the blood-colored muck. I saw animal bones coated with it. Once I heard a dreadful mewing sound and saw a quivering strip of naked redness trying to hide itself in a reddened human skull.

The highway bridge at the bottom of the valley was missing. I was trying to cross the rocky gorge, splashing and staggering through a shallow river of that clotted slime, when I heard the shrilling of the ants and caught their sulphuric scent and saw a silver-colored ball dropping toward me.

I tried to wave it away. When it came on I raised the deer rifle and fired. The only result was a flicker of darkness and a bitter tang on my tongue. The globe dropped to the brink of that red river. A long strip of honeycombed ants folded down to make a black-lined gangway.

KYRIE stepped out upon it. Dream or not—I was not certain. Her nude beauty clashed against the horror of that red-walled valley in a way that dazed me. The daylight washed her marble flesh with swift pink and gold, as if she had been a stone Venus touched with instant life. Not quite sane, I brought up the rifle.

"Get away!" I gasped. "I can't endure anything else."

"Uncle Kim—" Pain choked her gentle voice. "Don't you know who I am?"

"You're a space alien." I listen-

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ed to my own hoarse voice with a dull astonishment. "You're like the snakes. Like the things that make the fog. Like the gamma-forms in my blood. Like whatever creatures the beacon will bring from the stars—"

"But the ambassadors are already here, Uncle Kim." Her quick voice and her anxious dark-eyed smile tried hard to comfort me. "They arrived on the tachyon ship, but you don't need to fear them. They've come to bring the transgalactic culture. To help everybody. I think you need help—"

"No." The rifle rose. "I've had enough from space—"

"The snakes are gone." She glanced into the sky. "They never liked it here. Our air has too much water and oxygen for them. They prefer to meet visitors out in space—in the vicinity of Jupiter—where they feel more at home."

"But there's the fog." I waved the rifle at the red-slimed cliffs above us and the blood-colored river lapping at my knees. "The things from space that make the fog—"

"We asked for them—"she tossed back her flowing hair—"when we invaded Venus. You remember the color changes our manned probes observed? They were caused by blights that spread from the garbage we dumped—spread somewhat faster than the gamma infections ever spread on Earth. Those blights killed half the aerobic life in the upper air of Venus. The more intelligent flying things down in the temperate middle levels found their food supplies depleted. They struck back in self-defense. The fog covers a military expedition composed of special mutant creatures bred to survive in our biocosm and sent to stop us from polluting their planet. It was a force from Venus, by the way, that trapped our men on Mercury."

"If we—" The simple truth staggered me. "If we had only understood—"

"That's why the snakes were here." Her urgent voice came faster, faster, in a way that made me think of Nick. "They're well-meaning and more or less intelligent—though I don't think they ever knew what they were doing to our aircraft. They were trying to communicate. The breakthrough came when they were able to explain the situation to our transgalactic friends. You should have seen the happy way they dived around the terminal when the Venusians began pulling back the fog."

"Why bother about the fog—" bitterness croaked in my throat—"when the human race is dead? Why not just invite our space friends to take over the planet?"

"Uncle Kim!" She made a face at me. "Things aren't that bad. The

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Venusians were pretty humane, by our old military standards. They concentrated their forces around our space centers—at Skygate and the Sino-Soviet installations in the Gobi. There was no mass slaughter. Though the snakes did stop air travel and the fog drove men off the sea, we've found most of the human race alive and well, on dry land."

I stared down at my red-caked hands and blankly back at her.

"So the world didn't end." Her rapid voice had slowed, and she had time for a quizzical smile. "If you can stand the shock! Our big job's done and we've got a short vacation. The ambassadors are off to call on our neighbor planets. Your enterprising brother has invited my poor mother to try the new snow on the Sandia slopes. Nick is on his way to visit old friends at Fairfax—enough of Guy is left in him so that he had to see those women again. Won't Billie Fran be surprised!"

SHE laughed, shrugged. That careless gesture may have hidden more feeling than she showed, but the liquid flow of her golden body nearly stopped my heart.

"And I came out to look for you again, though everybody else had given you up." Halfway down the black gangway she paused to study me. "About time, too. If you could see yourself—a perfect scarecrow!"

She laughed at me. Wading to meet her, I stopped again, stung by her look of sheer delight.

"Kim!" Concern erased her laughter. "What's the matter?"

"I'm just a man, for one thing." My own sardonic voice surprised me. "I'm afraid I don't belong on your bright new superhuman world." I saw her hurt protest and raised my gritty voice. "For another thing, I believe my gamma-form infection has come back."

"Our new health service will soon cure that." She left the ramp and picked her way across the slick red rocks to the brink of the blood-colored stream. Pausing there, golden hands on golden hips, she surveyed me from enigmatic eyes.

"There's a quicker treatment." Her warm amusement was mixed with something else. "One we might both enjoy. You know I was born with a natural immunity to all sorts of infection. There's a way I can use it to cure you—though your doctor might frown at the method."

Waiting to discover what she meant, I stood admiring her tawny loveliness. I felt my pulses throbbing and wondered vaguely if her unearthly power had already begun to lift me out of my long exhaustion. Fond recollections were dancing in my brain like champagne bubbles—images of Kyrie's infant elfin charm, of her tiny hand trustingly in mine, of her

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secret delight in her own peculiar music, of her strange games with little Nick, of that magic moment when the touch of the nexode made her a woman. Now the sunlight gilded her breasts and thighs and I was shaken with a spasm of unexpected lust. Dismayed, suddenly conscious of my hungry stare, I tried to turn away.

"You needn't feel so damned incestuous!" Her ringing laugh mocked my confusion. "After all, you're not my real uncle." Her eyes turned grave and almost sad. "You see, Kim, the nexode showed me long ago how you felt about me. I think I've always understood you better than you understand yourself—and loved you more than you dare love anybody. That's why I've come to find you."

Her impish look faded into a cool directness that took my breath.

"That's the reason for my only reservation now. I don't want to hurt you more than you've been hurt. Whatever—" She paused as if to weigh me. "Whatever we do, I hope you won't let it matter too much."

I waited in a daze.

"First of all, there's something I must tell you." Her voice fell soberly. "Nick and I will be leaving on the tachyon ship. We're to represent our whole group of planets. I don't know when we'll be back."

Her face reflected my pain.

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"I'm sorry, Kim. I don't like leaving you, my mother, or Uncle Yuri and Aunt Carolina. But it's part of the job we were born to do, and we're both excited about it. It's another big mission, helping all our worlds adjust to the culture of the stars."

I nodded bleakly as that sank in.

"I thought you ought to know," she said. "Because no other creature can follow until certain problems of health and law have been cleared up. We'll have to leave you here."

She came toward me through the clotted mud. I dropped the rifle.

She kissed me—Kyrie kissed me.

I followed her out of the mud. The shrilling of the ants was suddenly a joyous song.

THAT day and night are special in my memory, too precious for any bare description. Drunk with the wine of her lilac-like scent, wedded to all her golden wonder, for that tiny time I was more than merely mortal.

Kyrie! Giving me that taste of superhuman joy, how could she have asked me not to let it matter? Her farewell left a desolate ache in my heart. Blind with tears, all I saw was a blur of blue when she opened the door of the globe.

"The starship is loading on the top stage now." Her voice was hurried and uneven. "The air up there is too thin for you. I'll have to leave you here." Her cool arms caught me in a last quick embrace. "Don't forget me, Kim."

Had she ever been far from my mind?

Looking out, I saw that the globe had brought me down to the middle of a vast white plain with only blue fog around it. A chill wind bit my nakedness. A forlorn desolation seized me and I turned back for a final glimpse of Kyrie.

"You'll be okay, Kim." Her voice had the edge I needed. "After all, you're a big boy now. I know you're well—and strong enough!"

I heard the love beneath her impish malice and suddenly it struck me as a monstrous fault that I had never properly told her how I loved her. I tried to speak, then remembered that she knew all I felt. I waved and strode down the gangway.

The blue glow had died and now the cloudy dawn revealed the distant loom of the central tower, lifting forever to that higher stage where the air was too rare for me. In a moment the beacon was burning through the gray clouds again—a glow of rose, a shower of gold, a floodlight flowing over all the unearthly magnificence around me. I saw Yuri Marko and Carolina riding up a ramp to meet me, undismayed at being left behind, waving and grinning greenly as the beacon changed. With a certain reluctant eagerness, I stepped into the future I had fled. ★

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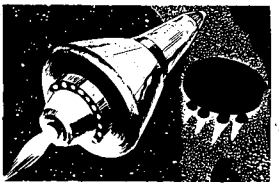

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